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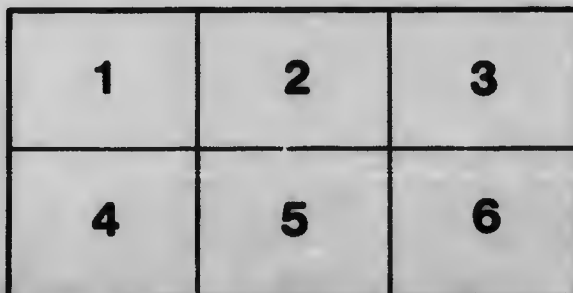
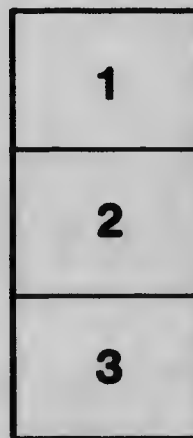
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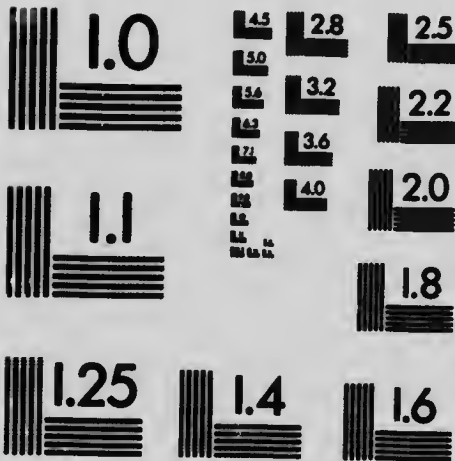
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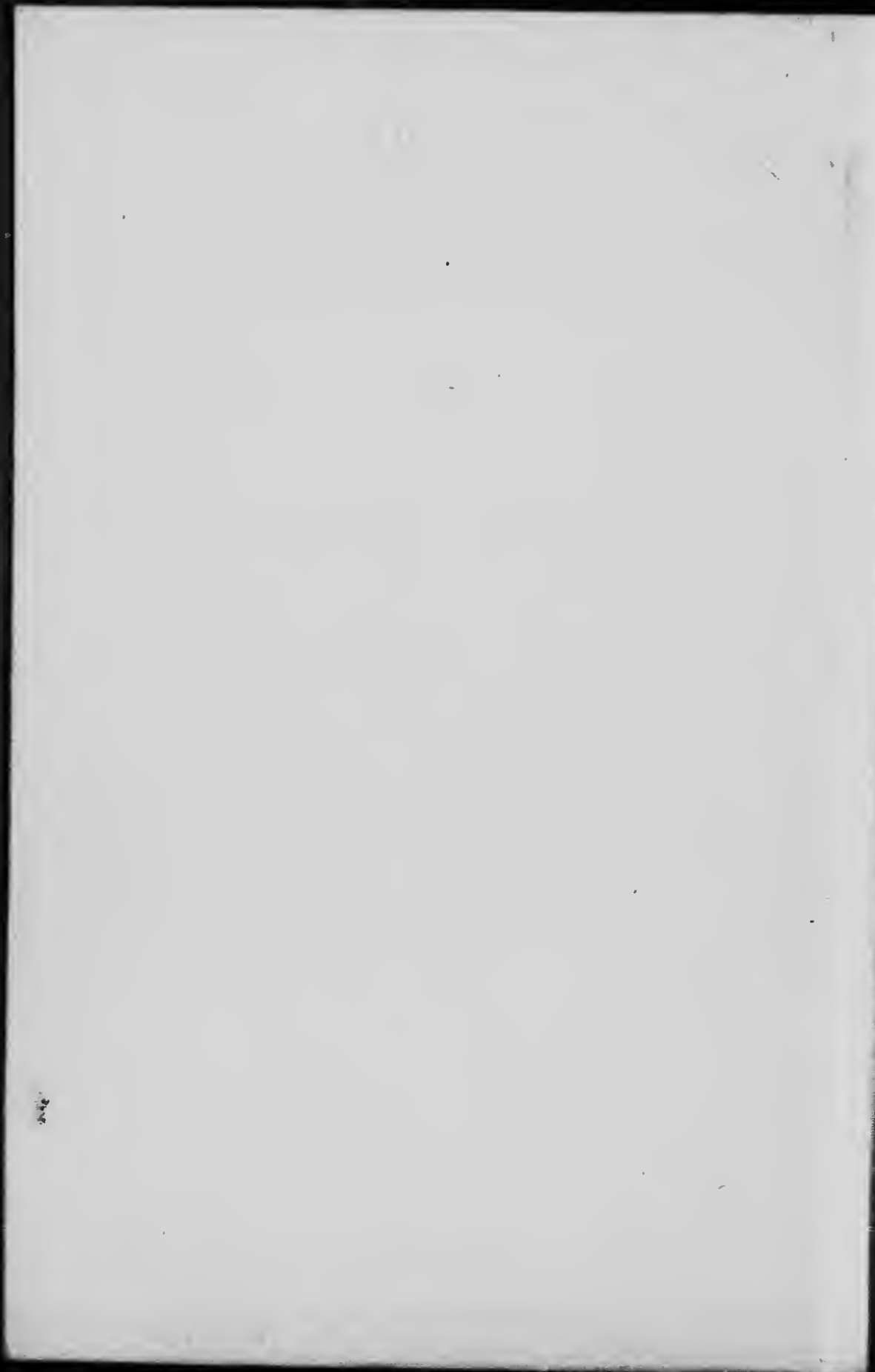
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To Harold
from
auntie pitman.

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Tom Stapleton
The Boy Scout



Tom Stapleton The Boy Scout

BY

CAPTAIN F. S. BRERETON

Author of "The Great Aeroplane" "Indian and Scout"
"A Hero of Sedan" "John Bargreave's Gold"
"How Canada was Won" &c.

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THE CHIEF SCOUT

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A book of adventures by Boy Scouts is bound to be interesting to all boys, so long as they are not impossible deeds of "blood and thunder".

In this volume the adventures are exciting enough but not impossible, and therefore they give a very good idea of what a Boy Scout is liable to meet with in carrying out his everyday duties.

Robert Baden-Powell

7.21.11

TOM STAPLETON THE BOY SCOUT

CHAPTER I

The Slimington Boy Scouts

It was one of those gloriously grilling days for which the Englishman longs, and of which, alas! he is so often disappointed. The sky was one vast sheet of azure blue, flecked here and there with a delicate line of white which trailed across it, not continuously, but broken here and there, and so scattered that it bore at times a resemblance to lacework. In the far distance the green of a beautiful country was dimmed to some slight extent by a heat haze, which since the early morning had drooped over the horizon. But on the summit of the long range of hills, with its swelling turf ridges, its scattered copses, and its straggling furze, all was brilliantly clear. Standing there a man could discern every object in the valley running parallel with the range, and every feature of the opposite range that shut in this lovely valley. And by reason of that same clearness a scout, or anyone for the matter of that, gifted with that all-desirable quality of sharp observation, could detect even a rabbit on the skyline, to say nothing of the outline of a man.

Tom Stapleton

"In fact, just the sort of day when a clumsy fellow could give the whole position away," murmured Scoutmaster James, of the Fox Patrol of the Slimington troop of scouts. "To think that there are thousands of men yonder, not to mention scouts, and yet one can see not a sign of them."

He lay stretched to his full extent on the turf, the prickly ends of a flowering furze bush affording him friendly shelter from the burning rays of the sun, and at the same time sufficient cover from the enemy. For yonder, just as he had intimated, lay a force of men manœuvring against the army which lay at his back, a force which, in spite of peace times, was none the less an enemy, bent on destroying the army for which his own particular patrol formed both ears and eyes.

"Not a sign of them," he ventured again, lifting his glasses to his eyes and scrutinizing the opposite height and the valley beneath him. "I've been here these past two hours, and though I have watched closely I have seen nothing but farmers' carts on the road, a cyclist crossing the bridge down there, and a party of sightseers driving down from the village on our right to see the fun. Things aren't moving. One begins to wonder if there can be a mistake; if, after all, the enemy have moved away."

He dropped his glasses for an instant, and turned to look at his companion.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"That they're there, at least some of them. Ain't someone careless too!"

Patrol leader Harry Kinchin tucked his hat beneath his chest, for the end of a furze bush was thrusting its inquisitive thorns through his shirt, and then let his right hand shoot out to the front.

"A camp fire!" he said emphatically. "Smoke, or I'm a duffer! I wonder——"

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Stealing up from the opposite height was a mere wisp of brown, which had escaped the Scoutmaster's notice. It was undoubtedly smoke from a fire, and at the sight, and the doubt expressed by Kinchin's last words, both swung round swiftly to gaze behind them; for in the hollow, fifty yards away, rested their own little camp, and in front of it a fire blazed.

"Right!" exclaimed the Scoutmaster in tones of relief. "Dick is too smart to permit such a thing. He's instructing."

"Billy, the tenderfoot," came promptly from Kinchin. "Dick's giving our last recruit a lesson in cooking. Dinner will be good to-day. We shall have lots of time to eat it."

There was a note of satisfaction about the last, for Kinchin had his failings. A smarter or a keener patrol leader did not exist, but there is a limit to everything, and Harry Kinchin reminded himself that for the past four days he had scarcely sat down to a meal. Things had been moving. The two armies had been slowly and cautiously approaching one another, and the Boy Scouts had had their work cut out. They had been afoot from early dawn, and sometimes right on into the darkness. A rest was welcome after such a strenuous time, and Dick Brown had a reputation for cooking.

"It'll be good to have a sit-down meal," he said; "and those chaps over yonder will be enjoying a rest just as much as we shall. That smoke gives them away nicely."

It seemed indeed as if, now that the armies had arrived within striking distance, there was to be a lull before the inevitable attack; a few hours of well-earned rest, during which time the men and the scouts in advance of them might loll about, might see to their clothing and cook their rations. No doubt the commanders of the two forces would avail themselves of

the breathing spell to mature their plans, Colonel Brand, of the Red Force, to which the Fox Patrol belonged, casting about to find a means to arrest the further progress of the Blue Force, who had dared to invade his territory.

"To-morrow the ruction will commence," ventured Scoutmaster James. "We know they're there, for the smoke tells its own tale. And they have had information, no doubt, showing that we are up here on the ridge. Heigho! Yes, it won't be bad to have an easy day. My, don't that cooking smell good!"

He turned again to look at the little camp, composed of four of the now-familiar scouts' tents, located within a circling hedge of furze. Seated in front of one a couple of scouts were diligently engaged in cleaning their messing tins, while before another Frank Sutton sat in the blaze of the sun, his bare shoulders glistening white, as his fingers fumbled to thread the needle by the aid of which he proposed to make good an enormous rent in his shirt. In front of them blazed the fire, a steaming billy over it, and Dick Brown and the tenderfoot eagerly superintending the contents. Yes, without a doubt, the stew did smell appetizing. Even there, fifty yards away on the edge of the ridge, the scent wafted by a gentle breeze made Kinchin sniff expectantly, while even James, whose age and experience might have led one to believe that he was decidedly above such trivial matters, sniffed at the breeze and bent his gaze upon the billy with unusual attention.

"Nearly ready, I think, eh?" he asked, watching Dick Brown as he dipped a long spoon into the stew. "He's tasting it."

"Lucky beggar!" came from Kinchin. "Say, Dick," he shouted, "how's it going?"

The answer came in a manner typical of Dick. He

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stood above the fire, the spoon to his lips, and, facing round with grinning countenance, placed one hand to his stomach and rubbed the part with energy.

"Better than they make at home," he shouted. "All ready, sir."

"Then get to at it. Kinchin, you go; I'll watch here till you relieve me."

For the second there was indecision in Kinchin's eye. The smell of that stew attracted him, and he was hungry. But then, there was the Scoutmaster, his superior. It was selfish to eat while he fasted. Besides, the Scoutmaster had been watching for the enemy for two hours at least. It was time to relieve him.

"But——" he began.

"Orders," said his companion easily.

"Thank you, sir," exclaimed Kinchin; and, promptly, rising to his knees, he crept from the skyline and joined the little group seated about the fire.

"Hungry?" asked Dick with a smile.

"What do you think?"

"Then hold out your tin. What's he doing?"

"Watching: sent me across."

"Just like him," growled Dick. "He thinks of everyone first. We'll save him a fair whack. "He's big—bigger than you or me."

There was little doubt on that point, for though Kinchin was a well-grown lad for his sixteen summers, he was nothing in size compared with their leader, while Dick Brown was even smaller. Not that he was puny; a better-built lad could not be met, nor one more lively. Dick Brown was, in fact, an excellent specimen of the boy scout. Tall for his age, which was a little more than fifteen years, he was broad in proportion, and possessed the sturdiest of limbs. But his jovial face, his merry, catching laugh, and his

Tom Stapleton

general friendliness were his chief attractions. He was, without a shadow of doubt, the most popular fellow in the whole of the Slimington troop, and if he happened to have had an enemy, it is certain that even then his keenness and proficiency could not have been called in question.

"Been in Canada, somewhere in the backwoods, don't you know?" said Kinchin, some sixteen months before, when introducing him to the scoutmaster. "Keen as mustard; been used to living under canvas, and sometimes without any covering. Has worked with Indians, done a lot of hunting, and is a first-rate cook. He's the best recruit we have had since the very commencement."

It was true enough. Business had taken Dick's father to Canada some seven years before, and Dick had accompanied him from England. Now he was back, the same jolly lad as before, though more wide-awake, having seen already something of the world; but a lad for all that, merry and bright, and glorying in the scouting work he had undertaken since his return.

"Like it?" he asked, as Kinchin sniffed at his helping and filled his mouth.

"You bet! Got heaps of it?"

Dick nodded. "Lots," he said. "Spotted what it is?"

Kinchin shook his head. After all, though he had a well-earned reputation for keenness of observation, yet, where food was concerned a fellow might enjoy some respite. He might, at least, be allowed to appease an appetite, always somewhat pronounced, before deciding the exact items which composed the dish of which he was partaking.

"Ripping, anyway!" he grunted between the mouthfuls. "Rations, ain't it? Rations and potatoes?"

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"And rabbit, found in a wire I laid last night, and mushrooms picked before you had stopped snoring this morning. Billy'll be a right-down good cook if he sticks to it. Won't you?"

The lad addressed flushed visibly. He was just thirteen years old, big for his age, thickset like Dick, and possessed of a nice, open face, which at this moment portrayed his feelings very distinctly. Billy was rejoiced. His heart was firmly set in this new undertaking, and a word of praise went a long way with him, as it does with all of us. Rejoicing in the name of William True, this new recruit of the Fox Patrol of Slimington scouts was known simply as "Billy". In his eyes, the Scoutmaster and his patrol leader, there came Dick Brown, and Dick Brown only. He could listen by the hour to that lad's narratives of Canada, could picture the men of whom he spoke, the men who worked in the backwoods, who tended cattle as cowboys, or who, far from their fellows, tilled their fields when the weather was propitious, and fought hard to improve their position. They were men indeed, worthy of the name. Billy longed to be like them. He longed to get bigger and stronger, and one day to do his share of their work, to fight his way up in the world, and strive by might and main to keep the country going.

"Yes, keep the country going," exclaimed Scoutmaster James one evening, when instructing his patrol. "You mayn't think it at the time. Each one of those fellows of whom Dick speaks is doing his share to help the Empire, though he may not be aware of it at the time. He's improving himself, getting richer, and so making his country richer. He's settling lands hitherto wildernesses, claiming more for the Empire, and preparing places for those who may follow." But cooking at the moment was Billy's task, though

other items in the education of a tenderfoot were not neglected. He had helped Dick prepare the stew, had watched him lay his rabbit wire, and had turned out in the small hours to search for mushrooms. No wonder, then, hearing his patrol leader's commendation, he flushed to the redness of a beetroot.

"He'll make a cook, say, won't you?" demanded Dick, grinning all over his face. "To-morrow I'm leaving him to fix the rations for all. Bet you he adds to them."

Kinchin looked interested. "Rabbits and mushrooms?" he asked.

"I think," admitted Dick, "they're the only things available. See if he don't."

And inwardly Billy registered a vow, then and there, to come up to expectations. He would himself lay a wire that evening, and to-morrow's rations would be as tasty as those of to-day.

"More smoke, boys," sang out Scoutmaster James, some few minutes later, creeping back from the ridge, and motioning Kinchin to take his place. "More of the enemy's fires showing, and therefore the better evidence that they are having a rest, and cooking their tucker for to-morrow. Now, Dick, give me some of that nice-smelling stuff; my mouth's watering. I've waited for Kinchin till I couldn't stand it any longer."

"Say, sir," said Dick, as he helped his officer liberally, "suppose more smoke and more fires do mean that they're resting? There was once a hoax——"

"Eh?" In between the mouthfuls the Scoutmaster sat up and looked questioningly at Dick. "A hoax," he repeated. "You don't think——?"

"As old as the hills, sir," said Dick, his face serious. "I was thinking of the scouts over there. They're same as we are, keen, and so on?"

"Rather! What then?"

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"Well," said Dick, just a trace of Canadian accent creeping into his words, "we'd be awful duffers to sit up here hiding behind the skyline, and then to give the show away by lighting smoky fires. Supposing——"

"George!" The Scoutmaster sat up with a vengeance now. He realized that what he and Kinchin had designated as clumsiness and carelessness was not quite in keeping with the character already earned by scouts. One patrol yonder might have been careless with respect to smoke. But more than one? No, nonsense, impossible!

"The first scoutmaster who saw a sign of it would be down upon the fellows like a sack of coals. Dick, I believe——"

"Sir."

"I believe you've hit it; it's a blind. They want to make us think they're resting back there behind the ridge, while all the time they're moving. That's serious."

"Supposing we sent along to the other patrols and asked them if they had seen any movement," suggested Dick. "Perhaps they have. It would settle the question."

"Set to at it," came the quick response. "Seems to me that you have dropped upon a little scheme which will require checking. For instance, look up there."

The scoutmaster pointed to his right, away along the ridge, to a spot where a thick tongue of land jutted from the eminence, and, shooting across the valley, joined hand-in-hand with the other ridge. In fact, seen from a great height, the ridges on either hand, with this odd piece cutting transversely across, formed as it were a letter of the alphabet. It was like the letter H, hugely magnified.

"Just the very spot for a smart general to make a

Tom Stapleton

movement," said James. "We're settled along here on either side of that arm. Well, what happens? The enemy locate us somehow, by means of their scouts, of course. Their commander secretly seizes that transverse piece, while he leads us to believe that he's resting opposite. Now, got it?"

Dick had: his face flushed with animation. "Geel!" he cried. "They'd have us; the crosspiece is thickly wooded. Supposing the bulk of the enemy is there now, hidden from us. To-night, or early in the morning, they push their way on to this ridge, and fall upon one-half of our army. They cut us clean in two. They beat us—what's the term, sir?"

"In detail. They lick one-half first of all, by suddenly falling upon it, and then make an easy job of the other. Get to work with that message."

Dick sprang to carry out the order. On the cuff of his right sleeve he wore the signaller's badge, and had earned it. Quick as a flash he selected a station, and thereafter, while his superior finished the stew, the young scout sent his questions across to the far patrol. Then it was a dry little cough which attracted James's notice, and swinging round he found Dick Brown at attention, his staff close to his side, his hand raised to the full salute.

"Well? What answer?"

"They know nothing, sir. Not seen any movement. I signalled both ways. They believe the enemy to be resting opposite."

"While we think otherwise. Dick, it seems to me that we ought to be doing something, eh?"

"A fine chance for the Fox Patrol, sir," said Dick eagerly, his cheeks flushing. "If——"

"If," interrupted the scoutmaster, "this movement of the enemy which we have discussed has really taken place, and we do nothing, we shall feel foolish to-

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morrow. Come over to the skyline. Are you afraid of capture?"

The very suggestion caused Dick to splutter. Afraid of capture, indeed!

"I could get across safely even in this light, sir," he said.

"I believe it, lad. Come and show me how you would attempt it."

They crept to Kinchin's side, and there for the space of ten minutes the three lay discussing the matter. Then Dick Brown divested himself of all unnecessary kit, and, running fast, sped away along the ridge. They watched him till he was out of sight behind a mass of furze, and then, though they surveyed the hillside with the closest scrutiny, not a sign of the young scout did they see. But Dick was no tender-foot. His sharp, observant eyes had noted the fact that, farther along, the ridge was already clad in deep shadow. He entered the shadow on all-fours, and squirmed his way down into the valley for all the world as if he were a snake. To cross to the opposite ridge was no very difficult matter, and once there he again obtained a friendly shadow. An hour later he came running back into the little camp above which floated the badge of the Fox Patrol of scouts, and, stiffly erect, blurted out his message.

"Fires only, sir," he said. "Not a scout to be seen on the ridge, and no army behind it. I crept along in the furze. They're all on the tongue that crosses the valley. We've got 'em."

"If only we can get the information through to the Colonel," exclaimed the scoutmaster. "That's the bother. Depend upon it they've thrown out a line already to cut our two halves asunder. Dick Brown."

"Sir," came promptly from the youngster.

"Get something to eat at once and put some food

Tom Stapleton

in your haversack. Warn Billy for duty; you and he will endeavour to get through to our commander. It'll want doing. Those fellows who are opposed to us mean to lick us hollow. They'll be expecting a dispatch carrier; you'll have to fool 'em."

That afternoon, just as the shadows began to lengthen, Brown and Billy set out from the little camp with a message, and it needed but a glance at them to decide that both had sworn to carry out their purpose. If it had been actual and real warfare they could not have been more serious. For this was an opportunity; the honour of the Fox Patrol rested entirely in their hands for the moment.

CHAPTER II

Billy, the Tenderfoot

"SAY here, you're trembling; shaking like a leaf."

In the dim, fading light of the day Dick Brown swung round suddenly upon his companion and scrutinized him closely. There was an air of impatience about him, a flush of anger on his cheek, as he noted Billy's condition and heard the chatter of his teeth. For the tenderfoot stood awkwardly beneath his gaze, the hand which gripped his staff shaking obviously, while, if only Dick could believe his eyes, the fellow's knees were positively bending.

"Funked?" he asked curtly.

"N-no."

"Then scared of the job?"

Billy shook his head vigorously, and made a brave effort to control his shaking limbs.

"I'm so jolly green," he groaned. **"Only a tenderfoot. I've never——"**

"Rats!" Dick cut him short in the middle of his explanation. **"Rats!"** he repeated indignantly. **"You're here to learn; besides, no chap is green once he's joined a patrol. You ain't used to the job, that's all; but you will be by the time we're done. It'll be ripping to squeeze through those fellows. Depend upon it, there isn't a scout on the opposite side that hasn't had particular orders to keep a bright lookout, and to stop any who may attempt to get through. Jolly**

Tom Stapleton

cock-a-hoop they'll be, too, if they catch us. Stop that shaking."

Billy made a frantic effort. He gripped the staff as if very life depended upon his doing so.

"It's excitement," he explained. "It's my legs; they're rotten."

"Stop it or I'll bash you," came the peremptory command from Dick. "We don't want a shaking, chattering beggar for this job; you've got to be as quiet as a mouse. Stop it or I'll make you."

In the brief space of a second the usually jovial and smiling Dick Brown, he whom Billy had looked upon as one of the finest and friendliest fellows, had become a different individual. In the dim light anger and determination were written on his face, and that and the threat of a bashing, whatever that may have meant, quieted Billy's overwrought nerves.

"Right," he said, after a while. "I'm better; what do we do?"

"Follow our noses till something turns up, then consider things. In the first place, we cut along the top here till we get to the tongue. It may be that the scouts of the Blue Force have not pushed out on to our side. If so, the job's finished."

He sighed at the very thought, for then the opportunity of showing the Slimington scouts what Number One of the Fox Patrol could do would have vanished; likewise the chance of demonstrating to the opposing side that there were some who had been cute enough to see through their ruse, to discover the exact meaning of those columns of smoke, and of such apparent carelessness. It would be glorious to turn the tables on them.

"And if not?" queried the tenderfoot.

"We retire to consider ways and means. First thing is to decide whether or no the coast is clear.

Billy, the Tenderfoot

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Now, young 'un, listen. If you're challenged, drop like a stone; don't answer, and begin to creep away. Run if you're followed."

"Right, that's simple."

"And if you're not challenged and can see a chap watching——"

"Yes," interrupted Billy eagerly; "give him a wide berth, eh?"

"Rot! Collar him! We want information; a prisoner is valuable."

"But—but would he speak?" asked Billy doubtfully.

"You bet. We'd press him; remind him that supper was waiting at his own camp, and nothing in ours. If he was obstinate, then, why——"

Dick paused, the determination which had crept into his voice vanished somewhat suddenly. If a possible prisoner obstinately refused to give information, even under the dire threat of going hungry, what else was there to do? It was a dilemma, and, being none too pressing, Dick set it aside promptly.

"Well, anyway we'll see," he said; "but mum's the word if you're challenged. We want to get clear up to their scouts if they lie between us and our own people. See? Then come on; it's dark enough. No chance of being seen within a distance of ten yards."

They set forward at a jog-trot, the pace a scout can keep up for a long time, and very soon had covered the odd two miles which separated them from that part of the ridge from which the tongue of land jutted out across the valley to meet the other ridge. Then they came to a halt and lay down on the turf.

"Not a sound," said Dick, after listening intently, "and not a sign of the enemy's scouts, eh?"

"Yes," corrected Billy, all eagerness. "Something there, I think. Something behind thick cover—a fire."

"Good for you! Well done, Billy, the tenderfoot!"

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It is a fire. There's lots of thick cover along the tongue, and that light spells a camp. If so, it belongs to the enemy, unless our own people have moved up into position."

"In which case they wouldn't have troubled to light a fire behind cover," ventured Billy.

"Why not?"

"Because they suppose the enemy to be yonder on the far ridge, and that camp there is well on this side of our ridge, and therefore invisible from the far side."

"My eye, you are getting along!" exclaimed Dick warmly. "Right, too, or I'm a duffer. That's the enemy: he's in position between us and the Colonel. We're going right in there to his camp."

"To see what he's doing?"

"To listen to his chattering. Come on."

It was a hazardous undertaking, and the very mention of it sent a thrill through Billy's veins. For if he and his friend were successful, think of their joy and elation; and if the reverse, what a downfall to be captured, to lie as prisoners in the enemy's camp till the following day, to know that they had failed, and with them their own side also.

"Never!" exclaimed Billy.

"Eh, what's that?" demanded Dick.

"I was only thinking aloud. If we were captured it would be awful; but we won't be."

"Not if I know it. Remember this; if they spot us, and there's a rush, we separate. Each makes off as fast as he can, and does his best to get through. Savvy? Got it?"

Billy had. He clambered to his feet, his staff held firmly, his eyes fixed on the twinkle of the camp fire.

"And if one or both are captured, mum's the word. No telling, no giving information."

The tenderfoot shook his head vigorously. "Wild

horses wouldn't do it," he said. "I shall know nothing, even if they starve me. By the way, wouldn't it be as well——"

He came to a sudden halt in the midst of his suggestion, fearful as to how Dick would take it.

"Well?" asked the latter.

"I was thinking, we might have a meal now, then if we're taken, it'll be all right. There'll be no temptation to tell."

"Stuff! You're not hungry again already; you've got to earn a meal. Time to talk of eating when we're through, and have reached headquarters. Come on."

Dick was not to be led aside from his duty by such a thought, and promptly catching the tenderfoot by the sleeve he pulled him along in the direction of the faint flicker of light which Billy's sharp eyes had first detected. Thereafter, feeling the ground before them with their staves, and halting very often to listen for sounds of the enemy, they pushed on resolutely for their goal.

"Voices," whispered Dick, a quarter of an hour later. "Fellows talking over there: outposts perhaps."

He took Billy's staff with one hand and pushed it in a direction pointing to the right.

"Clean between us and our friends," he whispered. "Stop here; I'll have a look at them."

He was gone in a moment, dropping on all-fours and stealing away in the darkness. Indeed, it was now so dark that though the tenderfoot, stretched to his full length, endeavoured to pierce the gloom and follow the direction taken by his tutor, he could detect not a trace of him, not the flutter of a handkerchief, nor a glimpse of hands or face. Dick Brown had disappeared thoroughly. Nor was there so much as a sound, for the scout knew his business. Creeping forward like a snake, he practised unconsciously all

those little tricks of his art which he had learned in Canada. A furze bush suddenly stood up in his path, his first knowledge of the fact conveyed to him by the spiky mass which pricked his face. Dick thrust his staff gently to either side, felt for a way round, and stealthily crawled to the far side of the obstacle. Then, having gained some few more yards in total silence, for his hand groped always for sticks which might be lying on the path and carefully removed them, he heard the sharp snap of a twig, and then again the voices, this time louder and more clear.

"Two of them," he decided. "Sitting there gasping, when they ought to be as silent as ghosts. But they imagine this business is going to be a walk-over. I don't think."

With that emphatic final remark he pressed on again with redoubled caution, and presently was able to ascertain the fact that the voices that had attracted his attention came from the far side of a thick belt of furze, which had again stopped his progress with no gentle reminder of their power to inflict punishment on anyone rash enough to thrust an unprotected face or hand into their midst. It was a case demanding caution and unusual discretion. Dick slid like a snake round the bush, but failed to find a way through. Then he tried in the opposite direction, with no better result. At last his hand fell upon a spot, perhaps a run made by rabbits, where the prickles fell away from one another a very little. It was not big enough for a scout, but it would do.

"Means heaps of pricks," he thought; "but that can't be helped; I've got to listen to their chatter."

Painfully and slowly he wormed his way through the bush, until at length his head emerged on the far side. Then suddenly he lay as still as if he had been petrified, for the voices, now close at hand, came to

an abrupt silence. There was not a sound save the noise of his own tense breathing, and the patter of his heart, for Dick was excited.

"Thought I heard something in the bush," he heard someone say. "I suppose I imagined it: couldn't be one of those fellows."

"Rabbits; the place swarms with 'em, a chap creeping through would make a heap of row. What were we gassing about?"

"Oh, to-morrow!" Dick overheard the first one reply, and at the words raised himself on his elbows and stretched his neck to listen the better. "We'll beat them into a cocked hat; make jelly of 'em. And then it'll be our turn to rest. Just fancy, while we've been working like horses those slugs have been sitting over their fires, eating for all they're worth."

"Which reminds me," said the second, coming in at this instant. "Precious little sleep to-night. Up at 3 a.m., no réveillé to sound. No fires to be lighted, but breakfast to consist of grub already cooked. Dry biscuit and water. Ugh! Won't we have a meal when it's finished! Afterwards——"

Dick's neck was stretched now to the point of breaking. He was listening to every word. In a moment he would hear what were the orders for the morrow. Then, suddenly, and with startling sharpness, a third voice interrupted the scene.

"Silence! No talking there; you might be overheard."

Almost at the same moment a figure strode into the space hemmed in by the bushes, and, stumbling against the furze in the darkness, knocked heavily against Dick. There was a loud exclamation, the individual came heavily to the ground, and in a moment the young scout who was listening realized that he was discovered.

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"I knocked against someone then," he heard the newcomer exclaim. "I'm sure I did. Here, you fellows, heard anything?"

There was a guilty note in the admission which followed.

"Yes, sir," one of the two who had been chattering replied. "Filcher thought it was rabbits."

"Rabbits! An enemy, man! Search the bushes. Don't think because you are careless, everyone else is the same. This move of ours isn't to be such an easy walk-over. Quick! Search every foot."

In the dense darkness surrounding him Dick heard the footsteps of the three, and even heard the deep breathing of the last comer, who came along the inner fringe of the bush on hands and knees, feeling for an opening, making every effort to discover the exact spot where he had come in contact with the object which had thrown him. In a trice he had lit upon the run which Dick was occupying, and promptly plunged into it, careless of the thorns which obstructed his progress.

"He was here, in this gap. Get round to the other side," came the sharp order. "Now stay still; if he moves, we have him."

But Dick did not move so much as an eyelid. At the first alarm, when his head still felt dizzy after the blow he had received, and his ears rang, he had taken advantage of the confusion, and of the noise made by this trio, to creep from his hiding place into the open. Hidden by the darkness alone, and hugging the turf in a spot which, because it was the most unlikely hiding-place, appeared to him therefore to be the most secure, he awaited developments, determining to take the first opportunity of creeping away. Now that opportunity came; for, having waited a whole minute in their several positions, and hearing not so much as

a leaf stir, the three scouts of the enemy proceeded with their search vigorously.

"Just my chance," thought Dick. "I'll go ahead a little, then creep round and back to Billy. Wonder what he's been doing; hope he's kept low all the while."

To the accomplished Dick the task of creeping away was not a difficult one, and very soon he lay in a position, between the three who were searching for him and their own friends. In fact, had he been alone, his position was just what he wanted.

"But Billy's there, and must be fetched," he thought. "Ah, they've given it up! That patrol leader is returning."

He heard voices now, and then sharp words from one of the three, words given in a tone of authority.

"You can thank yourselves for your carelessness," he heard. "You're sure you said nothing definite about to-morrow's attack?"

"Nothing," came the eager response.

"Then let this be a lesson. Outposts always obey orders and keep silent."

The patrol leader came back through the darkness, and passed within a foot of Dick, causing the latter to crouch still lower. Then silence again settled down upon the surroundings.

"Good," thought Dick. "Now for Billy: first of all to get the direction. That fire will give it to me."

But there was no fire visible. Either it had been quenched already, for no doubt the commotion made by the outpost had been heard in the camp, or else the change of position had caused other thicker cover to come between it and Dick. As for the latter, in spite of his experience, he was totally nonplussed for the moment; for the darkness was decidedly confusing. Moreover, in his haste and in his endeavour to secure a safe hiding-place, he had turned and twisted amongst

the bushes, till now he could not say in which direction he was facing. Vainly he peered about him. There was not a flicker of light to guide his steps, not a star was visible. To wander on was only to increase his difficulty.

"Let's think it out," he said, stretching himself at full length and resting his head in his hands. "We were coming due east along the ridge. Ah! Got it! What a donkey I am, to be sure. It was blowing from the east. The wind was dead in our faces; not that there was much of it."

His thumb went to his mouth at once, and having sucked it he held it aloft, rising to his knees to do so. And within a minute he was sure of his direction.

"Got it!" he exclaimed again, with satisfaction. "Now to find Billy; I left him beside a thorn tree growing amongst the furze. It'll take some locating, but can be done with the help of a call."

Setting his face to the wind he set off at a slow pace, his staff feeling the ground before him. And in the course of some twenty minutes he came to the tree beneath which Billy had been left reclining. Promptly Dick uttered the call of the foxes, gently but with sufficient loudness to reach his comrade. But there was no response, not even when he repeated the call. Then, desperately, he tried it a third time, and on this occasion the answering call came from a distance, over towards the spot where the voices of the out-posts had come. And there Dick found his comrade some moments later.

"What's this?" he demanded sternly. "I left you beside the thorn tree."

"I heard a ruction. I thought you might have got into a hole; I crept forward."

The explanation came lamely; Billy felt intuitively that he had made an error.

"Look here, my boy," asked Dick harshly, "what were your orders?"

"To stay where I was till you returned. I know I—"

"Stow it!" exclaimed Dick curtly. "Orders are orders, even when given by those under the rank of scoutmaster or patrol leader. You disobeyed. The first thing for a tenderfoot to learn when he joins is to obey. Orders ain't given for fun; they're meant for something. Breaking them don't help work along. My word, I've a mind to send you back again!"

It was a terrible indictment. Billy quailed in the darkness, while his lips endeavoured to frame an excuse; but, like a sensible fellow, he remained silent for a while.

"Sorry," he said at last "I deserve kicking; I'll remember."

"Then we'll say no more about it. Look here, the Blue Force are in position. They grub at 3 a.m. to-morrow, and the attack no doubt commences immediately after. We must move. My idea is to cut down into the valley, cross the tongue over at the far side, then across to the ridge again to our own people. How's that?"

"Seems to be the only way."

"Then come; no talking."

They stole away in the darkness, and cutting to the left made their way down the steep ridge to the valley below. Then, arriving at the point where it joined with the far ridge, they clambered over it, and descended again.

"Halt! Who goes there?" The challenge, given in shrill, youthful tones, came with startling suddenness in the silence. Billy gasped; Dick seized him by the sleeve.

"Stop!" he whispered. "Not a sound; drop down."

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They fell on their faces, and as they lay there they heard the challenge repeated in more peremptory tones, followed by a loud call. At once there came the noise of many feet, the snapping of twigs, the rustle of bracken and the clatter of people running. A sharp question was asked. There was an immediate answer, and then a command.

"Spread out and search. "We've just had news down from the tongue that enemy's scouts have been near the camp. Spread out; there are some more of the beggars."

"Come along," whispered Dick. "No waiting. This way; hold on to my staff. Ah! listen to that. It's another Fox Patrol."

By the merest chance he and his companion had stumbled into the midst of a patrol of scouts rejoicing in the same badge as their own. There was no doubt about it, for on every side, as scout came against scout, the well-known call was sounded.

"Right," whispered Dick, excitement in his tones and a chuckle on his lips. "See, if we don't trick 'em. Remember to answer if you're challenged."

And sure enough they were challenged. In a moment or two, as they stole along, a burly figure loomed up in the darkness and blocked their progress. "Who goes?" came softly on the air, and then the call of the patrol.

Promptly Dick responded. "All's well," he said. "Foxes."

"Seen anything of them?"

"Not a sign; best spread out."

It was evident that his voice had not betrayed him, for the enemy promptly dived off in another direction.

"Run," commanded Dick, and in a moment they had taken to their heels, Billy clinging to one end of the staff which Dick carried.

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"Now we'll have a breather. Sit down; we're close home. Best get our wind or we shan't be able to give the yarn. My, won't the Blues be sold!"

Billy could hear him chuckling as he sat beside him and started as Dick brought a hand smack down on to his thigh.

"Got 'em, my boy," he whispered hoarsely. "See if I don't dish the whole game. It was worth trying."

It was indeed, and if Billy had had any doubts, the Colonel's face when he and Dick were brought before him by their own outposts was enough reward in itself. Amazement at the tale, and at the unforeseen movement of the enemy, was soon displaced by a genuine flush of approval.

"Tell me how you got through?" he asked. And then, when he had listened, "Grandly done," he said warmly. "If it had been active service it couldn't have been better. What are we to do, eh?"

He fired the question off at the two young scouts as if he expected them to answer. But neither spoke. Discipline demanded silence. Instead, they stood rigidly to attention in the lamplight cast from the Colonel's tent.

"Well, I'm asking, what are we to do?" came the question again. "You, Dick Brown, who I see are responsible for bringing the message through. You've thought it out; that's one of the duties of a scout. You've wondered what I'd do. You have prepared an answer."

Dick had. "Be Prepared" was a motto which his active mind found little difficulty in acting up to. Still, to be suddenly questioned by a commander was trying.

"Come," said the Colonel encouragingly. "There's nothing to fear. What move do you advise?"

Dick flushed red in the light. His lips parted for a moment, and he jerked his head back just a trifle

farther. His tongue moistened the edges of his mouth, and he gulped at something.

"There's only one thing to do, sir," he said. "March the men back from the ridge at the first streak of dawn. Close them round the end of the tongue and keep the enemy from spreading. You'll have them cramped together in a lump on the narrow tongue, and can pour in fire from all sides. A strong company sent down into the valley now, with orders to occupy the far end of the tongue by which the enemy entered, will keep them from retreating. Earthworks would make that impossible. You'd smash 'em."

"To pieces," cried the Colonel eagerly. "Just what I should do myself. Tom, take these lads into the mess."

He called to a lad of some sixteen years of age who stood behind him, and then hurried off. As for Dick and Billy, within two minutes they were seated at a table laden with good things, and, plied by their host, did ample justice to them."

Early the following morning, long before the Blues had had time to eat their breakfast, the Red Force threw itself impetuously upon them. Hemmed in, for they had as yet not debouched from the tongue, the enemy could not reply effectively to the fire poured into their ranks, while an attempt to descend to the valley led to severe punishment. A retreat failed signally, for the far end of the tongue was barred by a line of hastily constructed trenches, and a Maxim spluttered in the centre. In half an hour, in fact, the action was over. The umpires had decided that the Blue Force was utterly destroyed or captured.

"And all owing to the scouts," said the Colonel. "My word, there's something in them! They were smart, those lads of the Fox Patrol. Don't you turn up your nose at 'em, Tom, my boy. They're as good

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as you, and better. Sing out for Dick Brown of the Fox Patrol; I'm going to recommend him and the tenderfoot for special badges."

"They're as good as you, and better!"

Tom Stapleton, the Colonel's nephew, went off in a huff when the words were repeated. Not that he despised the boy scouts. He'd have loved to have been with Dick Brown on that eventful evening; but on many an occasion now he had looked down from the fine grounds in which his uncle's house was situated, and had watched the scouts.

"It'd be kind of *infra dig.* for a chap who's just gone to Eton," he told himself. "Besides, they're mixed. There are boys from the village—Jones, the grocer's son, and lots of others. Can't see how James can do it."

It was not Tom's fault entirely that he was inclined to be a snob. It was the fault of some of the class to which he belonged. He was yet to learn that scouts are good fellows; that rubbing shoulders with every sort and grade of comrade is a pleasure; and that a scout who knows his business is fitter, for that very reason, for Eton or any other school you like to think of.

Infra dig. indeed! Tom's stupid idea of dignity alone prevented him from showing himself as a right-down good fellow.

CHAPTER III

Tom Stapleton Intervenes

SLIMINGTON was one of those long, straggling villages one sees so often hugging a main road. It had the appearance of having made a valiant effort to extend a hand towards the suburbs of the nearest city, only to despair of the task and come to a sudden and somewhat ignominious ending, as at either extremity cattle sheds alone marked the confines of the village. For the rest, it boasted a church and pretty rectory; a number of shops, in almost every one of which one could purchase an assortment of goods, from herrings and butter down to the humble but useful needle and cotton. There were a few gentlemen's residences, lying for the most part at the back of the main street; a village hall, a tin shanty but recently erected; and numerous public-houses.

"In fact, so many that they appear to be the most prominent feature," said Mr. Henry James one day when discussing the matter with a stranger. "They are the bane of the village, and I consider we could do with less than half the number. And I am sure that all of them do not really pay. The workman of to-day is more thrifty and drinks less. Still, they are, with the usual crowd of loafers hanging about them."

Henry James was, in more respects than one, a fortunate man. Hardly thirty years of age, he had a passion for gardening, which a modest income allowed him to indulge. He possessed one of those residences

lying at the back of the main street, a gorgeous garden, and sundry paddocks. There he lived with his wife, his time being fully occupied between tending the garden and coaching certain youngsters who lived in the neighbourhood. Indeed for some years he had acted as a tutor, and a thoroughly good one he made. The coming of the boy-scout movement had found in him a keen partisan. He became at once its chief exponent, and in a short space of time had gathered together sufficient boys to form four patrols.

"And there it rests," he said to his wife one day, with something approaching a sigh. "There are heaps more boys in the village, and young men too; but certain of the latter act as deterrents. They prefer to loaf outside the public-houses, and keep the youngsters from joining us. Sometime I shall get them as recruits perhaps; but it is a long time coming."

In fact, Scoutmaster James was meeting with a difficulty with which others have had to contend, and with which many, no doubt, will have to fight. There are always vicious and lazy individuals who, because they are disinclined themselves to join some movement, use their evil influence to prevent others. Here, in Slimington, there was a band of young men who kept their brothers from joining the scouts, and who never lost an opportunity of jeering at the patrols as they passed.

"It makes one's blood boil, I know, lads," admitted Scoutmaster James on one very bitter occasion, when a band of roughs had persistently followed the patrols and had laughed and shouted at them. "One feels that one ought to retaliate, that with the organization we possess it would be an easy matter to drive them off and read them a lesson; but then, that is not our duty. We have other and better things to think of. Still, there you are; if I lifted a finger, I know the lads would back me up.'

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"Rather!" exclaimed Kinchin, whose face on this occasion told of his anger. "We'd make a good show with such skulkers. They think it fine to be seen about, smoking cigarettes and idling; but let them actually interfere with us, and then——"

"There'll be a ruction!" exclaimed Dick Brown warmly. "My eye! I'd like to——"

"Hush! We won't talk about it," said the Scout-master. "Let us show them that we can do our duty in spite of them, and that one of the tasks we have set ourselves is to bear with their rudeness and keep our tempers. Remember the way we have. If they shout and laugh we'll set up a chorus."

But flesh and blood is weak, even in the case of scouts, and in a little while the lot of the patrols became almost unbearable. For some of the village hooligans most unmistakably set themselves to work to wreck what was already a successful movement.

"We ain't goin' to have a lot of kids walkin' about pretendin' they know more than their elders," growled a fat-faced, ill-kempt individual named Franklin, whose person was redolent of ale and stale tobacco. "They're upsettin' the place. Seems to me that if you don't belong to them scouts you ain't good for nothing. I'm goin' to stop it. I ain't afraid of Mr. James."

"Nor me," chipped in another of the little band crowding the bar of the Ship and Anchor. "Nor me, nohow. Seems to me that we wants to do something more than laughin' at 'em. But what? That's where I'm fixed."

It was not surprising that anything should "fix" this individual, for his face was a fair indication of his attainments, or rather of their lack. Thick-lipped, with overshadowing brows and a few thin hairs about a weak chin, the youth was just such another as one may come across on occasion, though not so often

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nowadays by a great deal, for the average of intelligence throughout the country has vastly increased these last ten years. Still, some of these sluggish individuals are to be found, and here was one.

"Of the very class whom we most desire to influence," had said Scoutmaster James, when discussing this very youth. "Just the fellow to be improved by discipline. A lad who has still something in him, if he can only be shown how to bring it out; but up to now, thanks no doubt to evil influence and faulty home-upbringing, he finds nothing to do once his work is over but to frequent a beerhouse."

"We'll find a way, never fear," came Franklin's answer when the thick-lipped fellow had finished his remarks. "Guess you and me, Tom, is the strongest chaps in the village. We ain't afraid of Mr. James nor of the whole lot of 'em. Bide a bit; we'll fix them."

Theirs were not the minds to arrive at a solution of the matter very rapidly, and in consequence many days elapsed, and there was need of numerous meetings at the Public before they had advanced at all. In the end it was by the merest chance that they took action. It was evening, work around the village was ended, and the scout patrols were making their way out to a rendezvous where practice was to be commenced. As some were free to go sooner than the others, they went individually, all, however, planning to be there by six o'clock. And, a few moments after that hour had struck from the church tower, Franklin and a dozen of his chief friends, all of somewhat unenviable character, set out also for the rendezvous.

"Jest to get a sorter lesson," laughed one hulking youth as he chewed at the stem of a clay pipe. "You ain't fixed nothin'?"

Franklin winked. "Ain't we, though," he said.

"You bide a bit. They ain't goin' to have the softest time in all their lives."

"Helloa! What's this? Blest if it ain't one of the kids that's late."

He of the thick lips, who we may as well announce at this moment bore the name of Raines, turned on hearing a footstep, and grinned hugely as he recognized one of the scouts. It was Billy, the tenderfoot; no longer a tenderfoot, however, for he had passed his tests. Billy the scout, resplendent in a new outfit, his staff over his shoulder, his cheeks flushed with his haste, keenness and freshness about every movement. Billy in fact looked a typical scout, just the sort of fellow one meets so often nowadays.

"My! If we ain't a swell! Say, what's this for?"

Raines darted suddenly from the midst of the band of hooligans, seized Billy by one arm, and with the other tore his knot of patrol ribbons from his shoulder.

"What's this?" he shouted, laughing in the faces of his comrades and then mocking Billy. "Got from his sisters. Why, ain't you a gal? I thought you was."

Billy was furious. A matter of a month ago he would have been entirely intimidated by this crew, all older than himself by some years; but a month of training does wonders for a fellow. Billy was become quite unconsciously a different individual. His step was firmer, his shoulders more square. He held his head more erect, and now never slouched as he had done only a little while before; but the change was even more marked in his face and voice. A pair of honest, steady eyes looked out at their questioner with an obvious smile on all occasions, provided they were not of this nature. And whereas the time had been when he was almost too retiring to raise his



“HELLO! WHAT'S THIS?”

voice, now he spoke outright, without hesitation, firmly, every word meant and well chosen.

"Let go!" he commanded. "Give me back that shoulder knot, please."

Anyone but a brute would have complied instantly, and would have admired the courage of the lad. But Raines and his comrades were of a different stamp, that stamp to which one of these days we shall be able to apply much-needed discipline.

"Listen to him. Don't he jest talk like a gal," laughed Franklin. "Mind yerself, Tom Raines, he looks jest like a tiger. And look at his staff. Seems to me as he'll be killing one of us if we ain't extry slippy."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before Billy acted; for Raines had shown no disposition to return the shoulder knot. Instead, he had flicked it in Billy's face, and then, pretending it was accidental, had lurched against him, and extending a leg had thrown him on to his back in the road. Hardly had his comrades commenced to laugh when Billy was on his feet again. There was a sharp movement, his staff swished in the air, there came a crisp thud to the ears of those listening, and a second later the bully Raines lay on the road, nursing his shins and howling.

The scene was perfectly ludicrous. The tables had been turned so thoroughly and so unexpectedly that if Billy's friends had been there they would have shouted with laughter. Indeed it would have been their turn for merriment; for, after all, a scout is but human. Bullying amongst the members of patrols is unheard of; but scouts know it exists elsewhere. They loathe it, and when they see such an individual punished, and that by the one he was about to maltreat, why, as we have said, human feelings triumph. Even a scout finds delicious enjoyment in the situation.

Here, however, Billy was alone, one against many. He was surrounded, moreover, so that escape was out of the question.

"Well, I'm blessed!" gasped Franklin, turning pale, and, if only one could have read his real feelings, having at that moment a strong inclination to retire from the scene, for Billy's fierceness and coolness unnerved him. "If that ain't cheek. Tom, you ain't goin' to stand a crack like that. He nigh broke your legs; do it hurt?"

It was one of those irritatingly unnecessary questions, a superfluous request, the answering of which raises the anger of one who has suffered damage. Raines groaned; he writhed on the road, and doubled himself into a ball as he nursed his injured shins. Did it hurt? The very suggestion of doubt in the matter made him livid with rage.

"Hurt! You idiot, Franklin!" he shouted, tears of pain in his eyes. "Wish you'd got it, and then you wouldn't ask. He's nigh broke my leg. Wait till I'm better, I'll break his body into pieces."

"I warn you not to touch me." said Billy bravely. "Let me go at once."

His eyes flashed at the group, and he gripped his staff in a manner which showed business. "Stand back; let me have my shoulder knot and then I'll go."

There was no doubt now that some of the ruffians who had hemmed him in had some doubts as to the wisdom of the proceedings. To be truthful, their courage was of no higher order than that possessed by Franklin. Only a sense of shame kept them there, that and their jealousy and dislike of the scouts. Then, too, there were so many of them—a round dozen. And this was only a youngster. It was Franklin who set the fashion.

"If you ain't got too much lip!" he cried hoarsely,

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pushing closer to Billy. "If it was me you had struck, I'd—come 'ere."

He thought to take Billy at a disadvantage, and made a sudden grip at him. But that useful staff, which the one-time tenderfoot had now learned so well how to manœuvre, suddenly flashed in a circle, and with a howl of pain Franklin realized that his arm was almost broken.

"Got him! Hold on to his staff, wring his neck—the cheeky beggar!"

A third of the ruffians took Billy at a disadvantage. He seized his staff from behind as the scout lifted it after his stroke. Then a fourth caught hold of one of his arms. In a trice he was a prisoner, held fast by this precious mob, buffeted and pushed this way and that.

"You can jest hold tight till I'm ready for him," said Raines, seeing what had happened and rising to his feet. He looked closely at Billy, and across his wooden, low-cast features there came such a sardonic expression that even Billy was frightened.

"If you lay a finger on me you'll regret it," he said as boldly as he could.

"Then I shan't have nothing to regret," came the answer, given with a smile which boded evil. "I ain't a-goin' to lay no finger on yer. You wait and see."

The gallant Raines hobbled to the roadside, and deliberately drew a huge knife from his pocket. Then he searched in the hedgerow, and began to slowly cut down a sapling.

"I ain't a-goin' ter lay no finger on yer," he said again, casting the words over his shoulder. "I'm a-goin' ter give yer a taste of what the others is goin' ter get. See? Yes, reckon you do see. Well, in a minute you'll be doin' more. You'll be feelin', same as I did a moment before."

Tom Stapleton

The sapling was cut by now, but Raines did not hasten; his very deliberateness was intended to increase the coming punishment. He smoothed off both ends, lopped the twigs away, and then even ringed the bark at the handle end and peeled it.

"It's got a fine swish on it," he declared, sending it cutting through the air. "Reckon it's sting'll last a trifle longer than ef I was to whop yer with that staff. Don't you be afeard; I ain't a-goin' to lay a finger on you."

There was a fiendish gleam now in his eyes. The aching throb of his shins reminded him that he had suffered from a blow, that he owed Billy some repayment. He came shuffling across the road, halted before the group, and deliberately spat into his hand.

"You can turn him round and stretch him over," he said, giving a grinning nod to his companions. "I'm a-goin' ter whack him fust fer strikin' me; then Jim there kin have a turn. And after, any of you as wants. We've all got a score against him."

Swish! The stick fell across Billy's shoulders, protected merely by a shirt, and the anguish of the blow almost caused him to shout. But Billy was no weakling. True, a month ago he would, perhaps, have given tongue; but now? Never!

His teeth shut to with a snap; he braced his limbs for an effort, and then, as the second blow fell he wrenched himself free from his captors, seized his staff from one of them, and struck out furiously on every side, managing to place a blow on the bully's shoulder. Next moment he was knocked to the ground by the mob. They hauled him to his feet again, and instantly the sapling came down with a sounding thwack.

"Stop that; let that boy go!"

The words came upon the group with startling suddenness. Raines arrested his striking arm in mid-

air, while Franklin, taken with a fit of terror, prepared to run for his life; for he imagined it to be someone in authority. But no; as the group swung round in amazement, they saw a lad clambering from a pony which was standing a few yards away, while another lad, dressed as a groom, slid from his saddle and hastened forward to hold his young master's animal.

"Precious set of brave men. One, two—actually twelve of them attacking one boy who is younger than any one of them. The village holds some gallant young men, surely!"

There was a curious stateliness about the address, while the lad who spoke bore himself in a manner which should have shamed the group of roughs about Billy, if, indeed, the words had not been sufficient. As for the newcomer himself, his features seemed familiar to Billy. He stared hard at this lad who had come so opportunely to his aid. Then he remembered.

"The Colonel's nephew," he gasped. "Tom Stapleton."

It is curious how, even in trying moments, small things matter. The very fact that Billy did not say "Master" Tom Stapleton came as a jar to that youth. It was not his fault, this dignity, as we have explained. Circumstances of his upbringing, and the fact that up till now he had never had an opportunity of rubbing shoulders with boys of every class were entirely to blame. At heart Tom was a sterling good fellow. He was the class of boy who would make a first-rate officer. It was fine to watch him as he coolly walked up to the group, and spoke in a voice which was hardly raised at all. And then the boldness of his words? Scorn is but a mild word with which to express their tone.

Franklin gasped: he stared wildly about him, then, suddenly, his knees straightened themselves.

Tom Stapleton

"Why, it's only that kid," he exclaimed. "You jest clear off. We don't want no fine gentleman here messing with our concerns. Jest hook it or I'll teach yer."

"With this here stick, same as I'm a teachin' Billy," growled Raines, facing round to look at Tom. "See there; sweet, ain't it?"

His arm descended swiftly, the stick came in contact with Billy's back, and once more that young worthy had much ado to repress a howl; for a thin khaki shirt offers little protection, while the sapling was of generous proportions.

Tom Stapleton made not the smallest show of hesitation. Those who watched him could have seen his head swing back, while there was a curious little movement of his hands as they fumbled at his cuffs.

Billy saw it. He recollected afterwards, under happier circumstances, that Tom always did the same when about to put the gloves on for a boxing contest. Whatever the movement, it occupied but the space of a second. Tom stepped right up to the bully Raines, and with one well-directed blow, which landed on the end of his nose, he knocked that individual off his feet in a manner which could only be characterized as truly scientific.

"I think," he said calmly, his eyes carefully watching those about him, "that a rascal such as you are—and evidently so are your comrades—deserves to be shown something. I'm always trying to be taught; I get a whole heap of lessons. I'm going to try to hand one over to you. Stand back, you bullies."

It was fine! It was Grand, Grand with a capital G, as Dick Brown declared afterwards. The coolness of it; the cheek of this lad; the boldness of one in the midst of so many. It was Grit, Grit again with a capital G. Dick Brown ought to know; he had

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travelled more than any. He had seen more of the world; he had been associated with men when his chums were with lads of their own size. And Dick had been present when there were rows, just as he was on this occasion; for, thanks to an order which had brought him at a run back to the village, Dick Brown had put in an altogether unexpected appearance.

"What's wrong?" he had demanded, as Tom Stapleton's groom came galloping towards him. "House on fire? Something of that sort? Want the scouts?"

"There's a row down there. We rode up and saw one of the scouts collared by a lot of roughs from the village. They were beating him. Master Tom ordered them to stop; he's started fighting."

"Phew!" Dick gave vent to a shrill whistle. The news took him by storm. In spite of a keen mind, this sudden information found him unprepared; it took the wind entirely out of his sails. Indeed, for one brief instant he was as other boys, others untrained to study each and every sort of imaginable situation; boys untrained to think out a method with which to meet every class of difficulty.

"My eye! That beats everything! How many of them are there?"

"A dozen, I should say. Louts, every one of them. They were whopping young Billy; I saw 'em. Master Tom's certain to get fighting; I know him."

"Just you gallop right along to the scouts. You'll find 'em a few hundred yards up there. Sing out loud for them as you get near, and tell 'em to come along. Quick's the word," commanded Dick. "I'm off. Get as fast as your pony's legs can carry you."

He swung round and left the groom to carry out his bidding. Then he sped down the road, and arrived just in time to see Tom Stapleton fell the bully Raines

in a manner so truly scientific, that from that very moment he, Tom Stapleton, was Dick's hero.

"Well done! Clean on the nose! Got him! Floored him; knocked the time out of the bully!"

He dashed to the centre of the angry circle, which had now closed about Tom, and eagerly shook his hand.

"Done it before?" he asked.

Tom stepped back as if he had been stung. He was not accustomed to such excitable greetings. Besides, was this another of the village louts?

"Hello!" he said, recognizing Dick and smiling warmly. "Glad you've come; you'll act as second. This individual, whose pluck seems to me to require a little testing, was swishing this fellow here, while these other—er—hem—gentlemen were helping by holding the chap down, so I interfered. This brute here threatened to teach me something, so I—er—don't you know?"

Dick grinned; he couldn't help it. Into Tom's tones there crept that curious inflection that lordly gentlemen sometimes indulge in.

"So I had to, don't you know—er——" repeated Tom, halting for the moment.

"Er, don't you know, dear boy?" grinned Dick.

Tom saw the smile, looked puzzled and indignant for a second, and then laughed outright.

"George!" he laughed; "I like your cheek! Rotting me already! But let's be serious. I had to knock the fellow down. Now I'm going to teach him a lesson; I'm going to give him something to remember. I should be a coward if I failed to punish him for his brutality to this young fellow."

"Stop! That's not your job; it's mine. I've been teaching him. Billy's my pupil; I'm the one to stick up for him."

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There was a flash in Dick's eye; he had recognized Billy, and at once the sense of duty came to him. Surely it was his place, if punishment were to be given at all, to punish the one who had harmed his own comrade.

"It's my job," he repeated stubbornly. "If I'm licked, you can have your innings."

Meanwhile the ruffian had picked himself up from the ground and had shaken the dust from his shoulders. Then he proceeded to divest himself of his coat and waistcoat.

"Don't make no odds to me who has the first innings," he said with a sneer and a growl. "Neither of you needn't be in no hurry I'm game to knock the heads off both of you, and as many more as you care to send forward to meet me. Stand back, chaps; see me knock spots off these here dandies."

CHAPTER IV

An Historic Contest

"Now, which one comes fust? 'Tain't no difference to me; only, in course, I wants to have a knock at the bloke what struck me."

Raines, the ruffian who had been so brutally thrashing Billy, moistened his palms, doubled a pair of enormous fists, and placed himself in a position calculated to awe the bravest. There was a sinister gleam in his eyes, while the little streak of red descending from his nose to the corner of his thick-lipped mouth did not improve his vindictive appearance.

"I'm a-goin' ter knock mincemeat out of 'em," he told his comrades confidently, squinting round at them.

"Thank you," said Tom Stapleton, turning to Dick as if there had been not so much as a word between them. "Hold on to my coat and things, and—er—er—I'll shove the tie in my pocket. It's—er—new, don't you know."

If Dick had not been somewhat heated, which mildly describes his condition at this moment, he would have grinned again; for, unconsciously, into the speech of this cool young comrade of his there crept once more that curious drawl, that lethargic method of speaking, with its unnecessary emphasis of certain words, usually denoting side, which often irritates those who have to listen to it, or on the other hand, engenders a feeling of amusement, amounting sometimes to ridicule.

In fact, Tom Stapleton, good fellow though he was, bade fair, if he were not checked, to become in course of time one of those young men whose heads are held too high in air, who find it impossible to pronounce the King's English as it is usually spoken, and who carry about their persons an unconscious air of superiority which matches badly with their youth and obvious inexperience. Mark you, he was an excellent fellow at heart, and a brave youngster, without a shadow of doubt, else how could he have behaved as he had done? No, Tom was stanch to the tips of his nice, clean-looking fingers, the only pity was that those fingers were not a little soiled with the same sort of work that scouts were doing, and his mind better informed of their methods and of their ways of living. Besides, as for his idiotic drawl, at this moment it was undoubtedly unconsciously assumed to smother his growing excitement, to convey to these louts about the impression that the one who had intervened, youngster though he might be, was not in the least flurried.

"There," he said, as he stripped his coat off. "Hold on."

"Not I! Not if I know it! Look here," cried Dick, his eyes flashing, stubbornness in his tones, "I'm not going to allow a perfect stranger to get knocked about for the sake of a scout. Ask our Scoutmaster—ask anyone. This is my job; put on your coat again and hang on to mine. If I'm licked you can think more of it, and have a turn yourself."

It bade fair to become a second quarrel. Dick's tones were becoming more than insistent; his face was flushed, his muscles at a stretch. And the nonchalance of this newcomer only increased his vexation. For Tom never stopped his preparations for an instant. Looking coolly at Dick, he slipped out of his waistcoat, undid his collar, and, having removed his tie, proceeded to

fold it up with aggravating care. Then Raines intervened with an interruption.

"Look at 'em!" he called. "Talkin' and gassing to save time. Can't any fool see through it. It ain't a case of both being anxious to take a licking. They ain't over keen. Ain't they funking?"

That was enough; it brought a flash of anger to Tom's cheek, the first outward sign of excitement. He thrust his clothes into Dick's hands.

"I'll fight you afterwards if you like," he growled hoarsely. "Stand aside! Play the game, if you know how to; hang on to these."

Like the sensible fellow he was, Dick swallowed his mortification, realizing in a flash that even if this quarrel were his by right of the fact that Billy was a fellow scout and a comrade, that Tom, the stranger, had also his rights. It was he who had first come upon the scene. It was he who had struck the bully, and had received in return threats of instant punishment. Good! Then he, Dick, would back him up for all he was worth. Their own private little matter could be settled later on, when there was the time and opportunity.

"Gee!" he cried. "If that don't beat everything! Wants to fight me too. But I'm here; I'll stick to you like wax. Give me the things. Now we'll get room for you. And here——"

Tom bent his head. "Yes?" he asked.

"He's as strong as a horse: works behind the plough. Don't let him strike you full; dodge round him, and let him have it straight on the chest or in the eyes. See?"

Tom nodded; he had heard the whispered instructions, and was ready to obey them. He had had a good deal of instruction in the art of self-defence, and more than once he had followed closely the advice of his trainer. Realizing that Dick must have some know-

ledge of the bully, he decided to do as he was bid. Besides, any fool could see that Raines was strong. Now that he had stripped for the fight, his brown arms showed that they were bulging with muscle, while his broad shoulders told of unusual strength. But the poise of this ruffian, as compared with Tom's, was not so impressing. His feet were too far apart, his muscular arms seemed to find it difficult to discover a correct position, while his head was lowered towards his chest, his chin sunk down as if he were a bull in the act of charging.

"I've been ready this three minutes," he cried. "If you're for fighting, come out."

"Stand back there. Make a ring," commanded Dick, unabashed by the row of unfriendly eyes about him. "Get back; fair play is everything. I'll strike the first one who interferes. You go over there, Tom. This is your corner. Billy, hang on to his things and stay over with him. Rounds to last a minute. Break away the moment I give the word."

Tom gasped. This was the last thing he had expected. When he entered upon this matter, and saw the rough louts about him, a thorough mauling was the least he had expected. Even if the thing came to a fight with this Raines, whom he had floored, he told himself that he would certainly have to put up with unfair methods and interference from the roughs who backed this Raines. And to look at them standing there, their faces flushed, and scowling at Tom and Dick, there was little doubt that fair play was not to be expected of them, so long as they knew that they were the stronger party. But here was Dick, a stranger to them, more or less, and in any case belonging to the scouts, whom they detested, coolly giving them instructions, ordering them to stand back, and placing the combatants in their respective positions

"Here, who's this?" suddenly demanded Franklin, declining to move aside, and emboldened once more by the sight of his fellows. "Who are you that you should boss the show? Minute rounds, eh? Not a bit of it. They'll go as they please. Raines is good enough for five minutes, and will knock this bloke out before half that time's gone. Stand back yourself."

He seized Dick by the arm and hurled him to the side. A moment later he repented, for the lad turned on him like a fury.

"Interfere will you, Franklin, the coward of the village?" he cried. "Don't you dare to touch me again. Get back!"

There was no ceremony about Dick Brown: no hesitation or soft methods. His staff came with a resounding crack across the ruffian's shins, and, like Raines a little while before, Franklin subsided from the circle and sat nursing his shins, giving vent to horrible imprecations.

"Minute rounds," said Dick again, pulling out his watch. "Get farther back in that corner. I'll strike anyone who pushes out of the line. Both ready? Time."

Like a bolt from the blue the clumsy ploughman shot forward, his head right down now, his fists before him. Nothing but thin air opposed his progress till he reached the opposite side of the circle. Tom had merely stepped aside, and when the bully looked back at him, there he was, smiling comfortably.

"Get in at him, Raines! Smash him!" shouted his comrades.

"Steady, lad," called Dick. "That's the way to take him."

With a shout of anger Raines once more launched himself towards his opponent, and, suspecting the

same sort of greeting as before, he halted suddenly in the centre, and, seeing Tom stepping swiftly aside, he leaped in that direction and kicked at his feet, tripping him. There was a howl of delight as Tom was seen to stagger, and then a perfect babel of yells as the bully bore down upon him, his fists swinging.

"Stand back!" shouted Dick, moving towards them.

"Let him get to his feet! Fight fair!"

But he might have spoken to the wind. Raines and his fellows were not the class of decent young villager one so often meets. The reader will have already gained an impression of them. They were loafers, drinkers, and bullies. Fair play was an unknown expression with them. Any opportunity fell in with their particular code of honour, and Raines acted up to that spirit. He pounced upon Tom and dealt a swinging blow at him. As for the latter, he had risen to one knee when his opponent was upon him, and both Billy and Dick held their breath, expecting to see him beaten to the ground. Indeed, Dick lifted his staff and swung it aloft, for it seemed that he would have to make use of it.

"Smash him! Go in at him!"

The noise was deafening. The band of roughs waited for the blow with impatience. Then they suddenly gave vent to a shrill shout of rage. Tom was not by any means dismayed, even if he were taken at a disadvantage. This class of warfare was just what he had expected from such hooligans. He saw those fists coming, and then, rising with wonderful agility and swiftness, he struck upwards as he rose, landing first one fist and then the other in Raines's face. Nor was that all. Before his opponent had shaken the stars from his eyes, Tom's fists thudded low down on his chest, making the fellow cough and gasp for breath, while a stinging blow, dealt with all Tom's force,

fell upon the point of the nose, causing exquisite anguish to that already damaged organ. Raines howled; he shook his head for all the world like a maddened bull. His sledge-hammer fists whirled in a manner which caused Tom to keep his distance. Thus for a few seconds they stood. At last Raines shook the stars from his eyes. Brushing the blood from his fast-swelling lips, he gathered himself together, crouched as if he were a tiger, and then, with a roar of rage, he launched himself at Tom.

"Time! Break away there. To your corners."

Dick gave the order in shrill tones, and, like the trained fellow that he was, Tom instantly dropped his arms, and turned to his own particular corner. But Raines had no such intention; his own desire for vengeance spurred him on, if even the shouts of his comrades had not done so. He swung round instantly after the young fellow, and dealt him a terrific blow on the side of the head, sending Tom sprawling.

"Foul blow! Time! Back to your corners."

Dick was beside the bully instantly, his staff menacing him, while the latter stood over his fallen opponent, looking as if he were about to kick him. Indeed, had the matter been left entirely in the hands of this rascal and his bullies, Tom would undoubtedly have received anything but gentle treatment.

"Bash him! Give it to him!" shouted one of the louts.

"Get back. I'll serve you the same if you don't mind it."

Raines turned on Dick promptly, shaking his fists. For a moment it looked, in fact, as if Dick Brown was to be called upon at once to take second innings. A howl of merriment greeted Raines's sally, while the ring was broken. Things, indeed, began to wear an ugly look. Billy ran his eye despairingly round the broken

circle, what could he do? Help Dick? Yes, his place was beside him."

Promptly he stepped across to the centre, his staff firmly gripped, the light of battle in his eye; but he had no need to come into actual conflict with these rascals. Once more there was an interruption. Kinchin forced his way into the circle and stood to his full height beside Dick.

"I saw that blow," he said, addressing Raines, and then glancing round at his comrades. "It was a foul one; time had been called. You deserve kicking. You men there, get back! What, you won't!"

He wasted no words with them. Kinchin had been on a parade before now when the excitement or the interest of the public needed restraining. He had lent his aid to the police, and had helped to force back the mob. On those occasions he had learned to be like our police, forceful and polite at the same moment. But here—polite! It was idiotic to think of such a virtue. He dropped his staff down to a horizontal position, gripped it in both hands, and, running at the hooligans, sent them reeling back. By the time he had turned, Dick had escorted Raines back to his corner, while Tom Stapleton had already risen.

"It was what one might have expected," he said. "I'm all right, only a bit dizzy."

"Ah, here they are!" cried Kinchin, standing on tiptoe. "Make way, you—you lout! Now scouts, staves out, press them back and keep the ring."

He was just as business-like as Dick, and set about his arrangements with a method and with that lack of fuss which showed that he had had experience. As for the scouts of the Slimington troop, they were not behindhand in obeying orders. True, there was not one as big as Raines; but there were at least four patrol leaders of reasonable height and girth, while

numbers gave an advantage. In fact, matters were suddenly a different aspect. A minute before it had seemed probable that Tom and Dick and Billy might well have been mauled and ill-treated by this band of roughs, while now there was no longer fear of that. The latter were in the minority, while the show of force, the smartness and discipline of the scouts, rather overawed them. They stood without the circle formed by some thirty members of the troop, scowling over their heads, and for the most part silent. Only Franklin ventured to exert his voice, and that merely because the sense of his being a leader forced him to do so.

"Oh, ain't we fine!" he shouted. "Ain't we jist soldiers."

Kinchin brought him to a sudden stop. Franklin might afford to sneer at Dick Brown, considering his greater inches; but Kinchin was a different individual. He was wellnigh full grown.

"If," said the latter, turning round to watch the bully, "I hear another jest from you at our expense I'll give you the hiding you've been wanting this many a day. And when that's done I'll send the youngsters to keep you in order. Now, listen to me; I'm senior officer here. Fighting is strictly against the law of the scouts."

"I knowed it; another precious excuse," came instantly from Raines, scowling in one corner.

"But," continued Kinchin, "there are circumstances which alter cases. The Chief Scout would, if he were here, decide to let matters proceed for this simple reason. We have shown clearly our desire for peace, in spite of provocation. Here it is a case of bullying, of brutality; that's dead against our laws also."

"And so the fight will proceed," said Dick, his eyes sparkling.

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"And so the fight will proceed as soon as our friend here is recovered from that blow. We allow him extra time considering how unfairly he was treated."

"You, er—you needn't really consider me," came coolly from Tom Stapleton. "I'm as fit as—er—er—blazes. 'Pon my word; I'm ready to knock spots off him."

They cheered him to the echo. The band of scouts drowned the growls of the ruffians with their shrill cries of applause; for Tom had grit. It delighted the lads to see his pluck.

"My word! you ought to be one of us," came emphatically from Kinchin. "I'd give a week's wages to see you lick him. Feel all right?"

"Rather; let's get ahead."

"Ready?" asked Dick, holding his watch to the fore. "Time!"

Both Tom and Raines advanced towards the centre, the latter crouched in his old position, Tom easily and gracefully, with a certain nonchalance of manner which became him excellently. But a moment later all his apparent slothfulness was gone. Those who could read between the lines realized that Tom was on this occasion keener, more ready for the contest than formerly. That foul blow had enraged him; he burned to settle the score.

"Steady!" called Dick. "Remember what I told you."

Tom heard; he nodded ever so little. Then, as the bully was in the act of rushing at him, he fainted, causing the youth to pause. And that was his undoing. Tom was within grips of him the next instant. He fainted again, making Raines swing his arms wildly. Then, with a dexterity which spoke of science and of training, he planted a terrific blow on the lower part of the chest with his right fist, and a second,

Tom Stapleton

squelch between the eyes with his left. After that he allowed the bully to recommence his rushes, of which the scouts who were spectators felt dreadfully awed at first. But Tom's coolness reassured them. Time and again he stepped nimbly to one side, allowing Raines to thrash the air with his fists.

"Time! Break away; back to your corners."

This time there was no foul blow delivered. Raines had sense enough to see that there was sufficient force at hand to assure fair play. He went to his second burning with anger and impatience. The uselessness of his furious rushes maddened the bully. He had hoped and expected to beat his adversary into a jelly before the second round was finished, but as he looked across at him he saw that Tom was seated quietly on Billy's knee, smiling serenely.

"Time! Seconds out of the ring."

It was a very business-like Dick who gave the orders.

"Smash him!" came from Franklin hoarsely.

"Smash the imp, Raines."

"Watch and see; he ain't goin' to have it all his own way," came the answer. "See here, young feller, I'm jest now a-goin' to make you pay."

Tom did not deign to answer. He followed his former tactics. Stepping sharply forward he feinted again, and then planted three heavy blows on his opponent's body. A fourth fell once more between the eyes, making Raines shake his head vigorously.

"Steady!" called Dick for the third time. "Look at his eyes."

They all looked, scouts and bullies together. Raines's puffy face was distended. There were two bright spots on the cheeks, and beneath them a pair of lips, which, though naturally over-thick, were now startlingly emphasized. As for the eyes, they were becoming mere

slits. Tom took in the position. He slid to one side on three occasions, allowing Raines to rush past him. Then, as the fourth was commenced, he astonished his enemy by holding his ground. Up went the right fist under the guard, and back shot the bully's head. Tom pounced upon the opportunity. He put in a slogging blow with his fist, driving the head still farther backward. Then, with a shoulder hit with the left he floored his antagonist.

"Bravo! well done!" came from the scouts.

"Stand aside! keep clear!" commanded Dick, though there was no occasion for the caution, for Tom knew well how to play the game. He had already stepped to a distance, and waited for his enemy to regain his feet.

"Time!"

Billy ran across to his protector, and, taking him by the arm, led him back to the corner, where he seated him on his knee.

"Ripping!" he breathed in his ear. "Went down like a sack of coals. You can do it again?"

He asked the question anxiously, peering round to look into Tom's face.

"Twenty times," came the curt answer. "I feel fitter than at the beginning. This'll be the last round. Afterwards——"

He looked across at Dick, who stood regarding his watch. But catching Tom's eye he came across the ring.

"You're a chap in a hundred," said Dick warmly. "You keep your head, and remember what you're told. If you don't lick him——"

There was a threat behind his tones. Dick felt that the honour of the scouts was actually at stake. Somehow he could not rid himself of the impression that this Tom Stapleton was actually one of them. Was

not his spirit like their own? Was not his code of honour direct, open to the world, unblemished?

"Gee," he went on, "if you ain't a good 'un!"

"Time!" He was back in his old position, and for one brief second swept his eyes round the ring. Kinchin was there, opposite, his face flushed, his eyes on the combatants, but with a glance every other second over his shoulder. Abreast of him were the scouts, little fellows no more than ten years of age, bigger boys of fourteen, and a trio or more of patrol leaders who matched the height of any of the band of roughs. As for the latter, their faces showed their feelings. No longer was there overwhelming confidence; they wore a hang-dog expression, while one, more chicken-hearted than his fellows, was already slinking away.

"Out of the ring!"

Dick crushed himself back amongst the row of scouts. "Steady," he called again, and closed one fist as Tom nodded and smiled across at him.

"My!" he sighed, "if he don't do it!"

"I'm waiting for that licking," cried Tom, as he came to the centre. "It's a long time coming."

There was a shout at that, a hoarse growl from the band of roughs. Raines heard them; Tom's words bit into his mind. He was conscious of the fact that his antagonist looked peculiarly far away and huge. His head was buzzing. His chest heaved painfully, while he felt as if he had broken a rib. But what pluck he possessed was not yet knocked out of him.

"Don't you fear," he answered savagely. "You won't be kept waitin'. You ain't a-goin' to have all the luck."

Then he launched himself at Tom as if he were a torpedo. With a bound, the agility of which astonished the spectators, he placed himself just in front

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of his enemy, and promptly struck blindly at his face. But Tom was not caught napping; quick as a flash he leaped aside.

"Try again," he laughed irritatingly.

And try Raines did. He dashed this way and that, chasing his elusive opponent till his breath was coming in quick, short gasps. Half a minute had flown by already.

"Now," called Dick.

Tom took his advice as promptly as he had done before. It was his turn to chase the other now, and well he carried out the movement. Quicker by far than Raines, and with the advantage of training on his side, he reached the bully every time, and on successive occasions planted heavy blows on face and chest. Then, just as he had done in the former round, he sent the man staggering with a blow directly on the point of the nose.

"One, two, three——" Dick's voice shook as he counted the seconds. "Time! Back to your corners."

But Raines did not get to his feet. He remained full length on the ground, gasping and moaning. They shouted at him from the edge of the ring. Franklin forced his way from the corner towards him.

"Get up!" he commanded brutally. "You ain't beaten."

But Raines declined to move. If Franklin had not the sense to see it, others could tell that the bully was entirely vanquished.

"Time," called Dick again, when the seconds had sped, and then, seeing Raines still reclining, "You admit that you are beaten?"

"Yes," came in dull tones from the bully.

"Hooray!" They heard the scouts' cheers down in the village.

"What's the meaning of all this?" asked a strange

voice suddenly, and then the figure of the village sergeant was seen entering the ring.

"A fight? Humph! Master Stapleton, too. And, why that isn't Raines, surely?"

But it was. That unhappy individual admitted the fact lamely with a snivel.

"Ah! So it's come to this? I ain't surprised," declared the constable. "What's the tale?"

"Listen here, sergeant," said Kinchin, stepping to the centre. "These louts you see outside our patrols have pestered us for weeks and made life difficult. But they've never ventured before to molest us. To-day they collared young Billy here, and proceeded to thrash him. At least, this fellow Raines did, while the others held him. Then our fine friend turned up, and—and you see what's happened."

"I see as someone's had a right down good licking," replied the sergeant, with delightful abruptness.

"Just so," said Kinchin. "I hope it will be a warning. The scout patrols do harm to no one. Their object is to help all and be on the best of terms with their neighbours. But they will not put up with interference from thickheads such as these are. There. They know it now. Fall in, Foxes. Patrol leaders, march your men away. I say, you're coming?"

He extended a friendly hand to Tom, and the latter took it.

"I—er—I rather think so," he responded.

CHAPTER V

A Popular Recruit

THERE was a crowded meeting at the tin hall in the centre of the large village of Slimington on the day following Tom Stapleton's fight with Raines. The long, well-lit interior of the hall was thronged with scouts of every age between ten and twenty, while, in addition, Scoutmaster James was there, his cheery countenance overlooking everyone. There was an unusual gleam in his eye, too, on this particular occasion, and more than once he was seen to rub his hands together vigorously.

"Of course," he was saying, as an eager group surrounded him. "I don't pretend to admit that the thing was altogether right: this association of our troop of scouts in a street brawl. But, then, it was most distinctly not wrong. There are circumstances which alter cases."

"For instance, bullies, sir," chipped in Dick Brown, who was never behindhand.

"Quite so; bullies are individuals not accounted for in our laws for the simple reason that we will not put up with them. Scouts are comrades in the truest sense of the word. There is no difference between them, whatever their social position, and whatever their age, save that, very naturally, the elder ones are senior, and often act as officers. Their authority

must be absolute. I'm glad to see that it is. Kinchin tells me that there was instant obedience. But——"

Scoutmaster James adopted for the moment a wry expression, an expression denoting regret which, however, his twinkling eyes belied. His hands came together unconsciously again, and he rubbed them very vigorously.

"But, sir," ventured Dick, "the thing was forced upon us. Every scout must guard his own honour and that of the patrol. It says so in the scouts' book; it is laid down in the scout law."

Mr. James smiled, and, bending forward, pinched Dick's ear.

"You are a young ruffian," he said. "You have no reverence; you even interrupt your officer. I was saying, or about to say, that, in spite of my gratification at the obedience shown, and the excellent discipline, I am sorry that there has been trouble. I had hoped to show these hooligans that we were above their jests and jeers, simply by ignoring them. However, as things have turned out, that was impossible. This Raines brought it on himself. Tom Stapleton deserves the greatest praise. Now, boys, fall in."

When Colonel Bland arrived upon the scene some few minutes later he discovered the whole of the troop of Slimington scouts arrayed for review. Drawn up in one long line, the dressing of which would have done credit to a regular company, they preserved an interval between the various patrols, and at the right of each stood the patrol leader, the flag of his little band hanging to his staff. There they were, the Foxes—particularly jubilant, seeing that their own men had had such a busy share in recent events—the Bear, the Curlew, the Moose, and the Lion Patrols. Sturdy they all looked. The youngsters stood rigidly at attention, and then came swiftly to the salute at the command of

Scoutmaster James. Then not a muscle so much as twitched as the Colonel made his inspection of the ranks.

"Stand at ease!"

"My laas," said the Colonel, stepping to the front, "I have to congratulate you on a recent affair which took place in this village. As one of the magistrates sitting on the neighbouring bench I have had a report from the police, who state that had it not been for the Slimington troop of scouts the fracas of yesterday might have been very serious. I understand also that, while the scout law provides that each and all enrolled in the scouts shall seek to do someone a service each day of the week, that fighting and broiling are distinctly against orders. Now, as an old soldier, I say that that law is good. It is one to be obeyed without question, and already throughout the country the scouts have shown their eagerness to follow it. Never yet have they earned a reputation for quarrelling. I maintain that yesterday's fracas was forced upon you. That in doing as you did you followed your law to the letter, for you merely defended your honour. That being so, we can banish the question. Good will come of that memorable contest. And now to finish. I have here a cheque for fifty pounds, which I hand to your chief scoutmaster for the use of the Slimington scouts. I understand that books are wanted here, and that you could do with a miniature range. I am glad to be able to help towards them. Thank you for parading."

They cheered him as only scouts can, and then at Scoutmaster James's order they broke their ranks. It was then that Dick sighted Tom Stapleton at the door and bore down upon him.

"Helloo!" he cried, grinning.

"Helloo yourself," came the prompt answer.

"You—er—er—you don't happen to look—er—very

Tom Stapleton

ill after yesterday, er—don't you know, dear boy," grinned Dick.

"Never better. Ready to punch your head any minute, and keep at it most of the day. Look here."

Dick took the hand that was extended, laughed into Tom's rosy and jolly face, and pulled him into the room.

"Yes. We expected you," he said eagerly.

"I've come to join. Will you, er——"

Dick roared. "Come right along," he shouted, dragging the willing Tom. "Will we enrol you as a tenderfoot? I don't think, not at all, don't you know. Here, make way some of you fellows."

"And afterwards, when you're a fully trained scout, we'll talk of that other little matter between us," smiled Dick. "Eh?"

Tom laughed outright. He felt as jolly as a sand-boy. He was just wanting at that moment to kick himself for having lost all that he had.

"What a donkey I have been, to be sure!" he said aloud.

"Don't mention it. 'Taint necessary," grinned Dick.

"I'll—no, I won't," corrected Tom hastily. "But I was thinking what a lot of fun I might have had if only I had joined earlier. You—er—you see, I didn't quite know whether a feller—er—er——"

"There's Jones, the grocer's son; and Frank, whose mother keeps a little store; yes, and Hal, whose father, no doubt, mended that pair of boots you're wearing. My, it'd be dreadful to get scouting along with them!"

Dick held up his hands in mock horror, and Tom fell upon him instantly. He was savage with himself, that was all—annoyed to know that he could have been such a prig as to imagine himself better than all these scouts. The opportunity of a scuffle with Dick was too tempting. It gave him the chance to throw off some of his vexation by active movement. Gripped firmly together,

they wrestled for a minute. Then, with a shout of laughter, they broke loose from one another.

"You're not so jolly easy to throw as I imagined," said Tom, surveying Dick's somewhat smaller inches.

"And I'll tell you something that'll be a help," came the rejoinder. "There's grocers' sons in the scouts, sons of butchers, bakers, and undertakers. They're equal, every one of them, same as you are with your chaps at school. Did ever you set yourself to wonder whether there were bakers' sons, and what not, there?"

Tom shook his head emphatically. The suggestion was impossible. Bakers' sons at Eton! Bosh! And then there came an afterthought.

"George!" he exclaimed, "I never looked at it like that! There are chaps there with handles to their names, decent fellows too. There are heaps of others, plain Mist'ers like I am. I don't know who they are nor what their fathers may happen to be. But you're right. Of course there are some whose people started small and became rich by working. Not many, perhaps, but some."

"Decent fellows?" asked Dick, his head on one side.

"The very best."

"And so is Jones."

"I'm sure he is. He looks it."

"And so are the others—bakers', butchers', undertakers' sons. All jolly fellows, as keen as mustard, good comrades on the march or in camp. But come along; I'm keeping you. This way to our Scoutmaster."

Scoutmaster James had been observing the two lads out of the corner of his eye while he conversed with the Colonel. To tell the truth, he had longed to obtain Tom as a recruit. For though he had no cause to bemoan his fortune in Slimington, seeing that for the

Tom Stapleton

size of this large village he had obtained a fair sprinkling of candidates for the scouts, yet he told himself, with Tom amongst them, and others of the same rank as he and Dick Brown, the movement would perhaps become more popular. He more than half expected that, after the doings of the previous day, the young fellow would ask to join; but he had had his doubts till a few moments ago. It was the Colonel who enlightened him.

"I've had a job to withhold his impatience," he laughed. "The fellow has been fidgeting all day, and longing for the hour for parade to arrive. Fact is, he's been bitten with the wish to join a long time now, but has held back because of some stupid notion that it might not be the thing. I'm glad he's decided; it's his own doing entirely."

"And I'm more than glad," admitted Scoutmaster James. "It will give a fillip to recruiting. His joining, and the handsome beating those louts had yesterday—for, in hammering Raines, Tom chastised the lot of them—will cause a number of youngsters to come forward, or I am much mistaken. They've only held back because they have been afraid of interference. Now that they have a champion there will be no more of that. We shall go ahead; your handsome cheque will provide us with rifles and a miniature range, and this winter will be the best we shall have had. I tell you, sir, it's a fine thing for lads; keeps them busy. Lots of times in the holidays, when I was a boy, I was bored to death; none of our scouts need be. There is always something to be done—scouting pure and simple, camp work, games, a thousand things; all teaching them to act as men, which is better than learning to get into mischief, or smoking on the sly."

"Quite so. And there is something else," said the Colonel. "It teaches lads to be independent, to take

care of themselves. Discipline and a free and active life well employed are bound to do so. Games help; and then, I understand, you practise boxing and other sports. Tom's a good hand with the gloves; I had him carefully trained."

There was something behind the Colonel's words which attracted the Scoutmaster's attention. It was obvious that the gallant officer had meant more than his actual words usually implied. He had, perhaps, some special reason for teaching Tom to defend himself. But before the Scoutmaster could attempt to investigate the matter by a question, Dick arrived, dragging Tom with him.

"New recruit, sir," he said brazenly, for Dick was not gifted with nerves; his travels had cured him of bashfulness. "Wants to join the Fox Patrol, please."

"Er—er—yes, please," agreed Tom, standing at attention.

"And we don't happen at the moment to have a tenderfoot, sir," Dick reminded his officer. "Billy's passed his tests; he's a full scout."

"So that our new recruit will become a tenderfoot in the patrol. We shall welcome him," said James. "But he will want instruction. Let me see; there is—ah, yes, there is Billy, to be sure!"

He glanced at Dick with a quizzical look on his face, and laughed outright as the latter's features showed dismay. Tom, the hero of yesterday's fight, to be instructed by a lad a good deal younger than himself, who was scarcely more than a tenderfoot!

"Why," gasped Dick in dismay, his jaw dropping, "he——"

"There, I was teasing!" laughed the Scoutmaster. "As if I haven't seen all along that Dick Brown had decided to instruct the new recruit. Take him away, lad, for the moment. We will enrol him formally, and

then you shall take him in hand. A good instructor, Tom," he added, "none better; he'll put you up to every wrinkle."

"On one condition," said Dick with emphasis, as the two retired to a corner of the room.

"Yes?" asked Tom, wondering.

"That you teach me, by way of exchange, to use the gloves. I haven't a notion how. I'd be licked into a cocked hat by the first chap who came along; and, though I don't want to be fighting, yet, don't you know——?"

"No, I don't," gasped Tom, for Dick took his breath away. Here was a fellow asking for instruction in boxing, the very one who, on the previous day, had been ready, and eager too, to fight Raines or any of the roughs, and who, in addition, was prepared to fight Tom himself.

"You take a chap's breath away," he cried. "You admit here that you can't use your fists, haven't a ghost of a notion how, and yet you get up and want to fight Raines. If that isn't cheek! If that isn't pluck, by George!"

Dick reddened. "No," he exclaimed shortly; "nothing of the sort. Any chap would have done the same. It was for the honour of the scouts. Someone had to do something, and that something meant fighting."

"And wasn't I ready and itching to do that something?" asked Tom, smiling.

"Right; but then, you see, you weren't a scout," admitted Dick lamely. "But is it a bargain?"

It was. They shook hands in the corner of the room to seal the compact. Then Dick took his pupil outside the building, and together they went through the scout law till Tom knew it by heart, and had grasped the scout's salute and the meaning of those three upraised fingers. Before he left the place that evening he re-

peated the scout's oath solemnly, Dick and the Scoutmaster standing at attention before him.

"On my honour I promise that I will do my best—

"1. To do my duty to God and the King.

"2. To help other people at all times.

"3. To obey the scout law."

Thanks to an ample stock of kit he was fitted with a uniform then and there, and when he stepped from the building, to make his way home, Tom Stapleton was a scout in every sense of the word, save in his lack of training. The broad-brimmed hat sat well on his head, and the lad showed a handsome face beneath it. The open collar, the bright, knotted handkerchief, lent a certain picturesqueness to his appearance, while none could deny the smartness of the new recruit, his sturdiness and grace of movement, the muscular nether limbs displayed by a pair of short blue knickers.

"In a year he'll be a patrol leader," said Scoutmaster James, watching his retreating figure with evident signs of pleasure. "There's stuff in that lad."

"There's a history attached to him," said the Colonel. "Listen."

They retired to the Scoutmaster's sanctum, leaving Dick to escort his pupil away, and before we leave them let us follow for a little while.

"Done anything for anyone to-day?" asked Dick curtly, as they strode down the street, Tom carrying his mufti in a canvas sack. "Yesterday you hammered Raines, and kept up the honour of the scouts. It was a queer way of doing something, but there it is, you helped the scouts. To-day, eh?"

"Nothing," admitted Tom. "Supposing we—er—go and enquire after the chap; he was rather knocked about. That would be doing something. We might be of help. In any case we could show that there was no bad blood on this side. What do you say?"

Dick accepted the proposal with alacrity.

"Just the thing," he said. "Shows him, as you say, that there ain't any animus on this side. If he takes the visit as it's meant, in a friendly fashion, we undoubtedly do something for the scout movement. If not, well"—with a shrug of his young shoulders—"we've tried."

It was a long trudge down to the far end of the village, and before the two lads had reached the house in which the vanquished Raines dwelt they passed a group of youths lolling outside one of the public-houses which bore none the best of reputations. Franklin was there, and at the sight of the two scouts there was an obvious movement amongst the group; but jeers there were none. Three days before there would have been shouts.

"Say, where's yer mother?" was a favourite jibe. "Do she know you're out? Ain't it better to get home again before you're hurt? Say there, how'd you come to get out of the pram?"

But now there was not so much as a word, though the louts scowled at our young heroes.

"They evidently are not in the best of moods," whispered Dick. "Still, scowls are easier to put up with than laughter and jeers. I suppose——"

It was typical of Tom that he acted on the spur of the moment, just as his feelings prompted.

"Yes," he said abruptly, "it's worth trying. Come along."

He swung over towards the group and walked directly up to them. There was a stir then. Franklin clambered to his feet, looking ill at ease. He was wondering whether the young fellow who had thrashed Raines on the previous day still bore a grudge and would attack him. He slunk in behind a comrade, while the others looked anything but comfortable.

"I've got something to say," began Tom boldly. "There's been bad feeling on your side for the scouts. You remember how it ended yesterday. Well, we want bygones to be bygones. There's room in the scouts for you all, and you'll find the work ripping. Won't some of you join?"

A painful silence was his only reward. One of the youths thrust his clay pipe back into his mouth, and whispered in the ear of a comrade, while Franklin shut his eyes and pretended to have heard nothing. Then one of the louts spoke.

"So is this work nice," he jeered. "But we ain't asking you to join us. We ain't got no room for toffs. You stick to yer scouts and leave us to manage ourselves.

"Very well," answered Tom quietly. "So long as you do not interfere I'll leave you alone. If not—well, you know what will happen."

He swung on his heel and with Dick in attendance went down the street whistling merrily.

"I felt ruffled," he explained. "Those fellows, if they had had any decent feelings about them, would have responded to our friendship. They riled me; I felt like losing my temper. Scouts whistle on those occasions."

When the two arrived at Raines's residence their reception was no better. The youth declined to receive them. His mother reported that he was abed, nursing his bruises, and cast no very friendly eye on the scouts.

"We just came to ask how he was, and to say we hoped he was none the worse for yesterday," said Dick. "We're sorry he's in bed. Will you tell him?"

A curt nod was their only reward, while they had walked only some fifty paces when a shock head was thrust from an upstairs window and Raines appeared.

Tom Stapleton

"Jest you don't come botherin' round here again," he shouted, shaking a fist. "I ain't forgotten, and ain't likely to. I gives you and every scout notice to look out. There!"

The vindictive face, with its discoloured eyes and puffy cheeks, looked anything but friendly, while the words showed the spirit of this hooligan. He glared at Tom and Dick, and then disappeared from view, banging the window.

It was a disappointment, but could not be helped. Tom and Dick retraced their steps down the village, and seeing an old woman bearing a load of wood, relieved her of it.

"So that the day shall not pass without following the rule," laughed Dick. "Where shall we put it, ma'am, please?"

"Bless us! You boys be rare good 'uns," came the warm response. "If all the lads was to join ye there'd be a better village."

Meanwhile Scoutmaster James and the Colonel were closeted together.

"You said in a suggestive sort of way that you had had the lad trained in the art of self-defence," began the former. "I gather that you had a special object."

"I had; there's a curious history attached to Tom. I meant to tell you as soon as he joined, for there is always a certain amount of responsibility attached to his person. Ten years ago I received this letter from a firm of solicitors in Toronto."

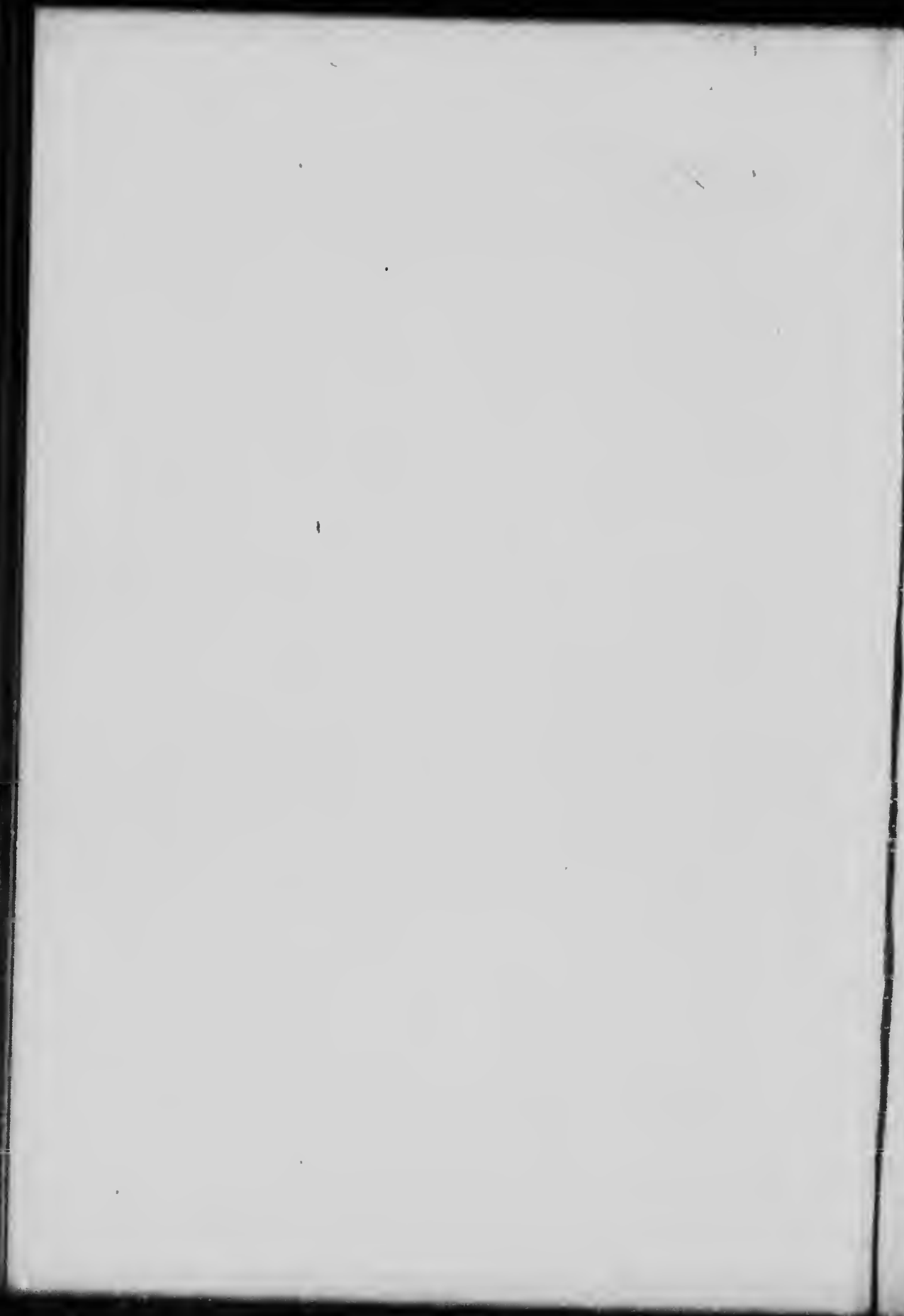
The Colonel dipped into an inner pocket, produced a packet of letters, and, having removed an elastic band, opened one of them.

"'Tower Buildings, Toronto, September 28, 1900,'" he commenced. "When you've listened, Mr. James, you'll agree with me that I had every reason to feel



C 2700

RAINES GIVES OUT A WARNING



some sort of surprise, if not annoyance. I'll read it. 'Colonel Bland, Slimington, England. Dear sir, We are taking the first opportunity of writing you to inform you of the death of Mr. Kidman, who, we understand, was a valued friend of yours. You will have known that he was a wealthy man, possessed of only one relative, a half-brother. His sister died some two years ago, or she would have been his nearest connection saving his son.'

The Colonel lifted his eyes from the letter for a moment and looked across at James.

"I was additionally surprised," he explained, "seeing that I did not even know that poor Kidman had been married. But then, it was nearly eight years since we had parted, he going to Canada, where in a small space of time he piled up a big fortune. However, to proceed."

He lifted the letter once more, found the place, and continued.

"Tom Stapleton, the boy above alluded to, was placed entirely in our hands, we being the sole executors of Mr. Kidman's will and the appointed guardians of his son. Our senior member, Mr. Frank Purvis, took the child, and Mrs. Purvis saw to his comfort.

"But we find that the time has come to give effect to a clause in our late client's will. Efforts have been made by some evil person to steal the boy. Once he was entirely lost for a space of three days, till the police discovered him, abandoned, miles out on the plains. There are indications that more attempts will be made, and as our late client specially stipulated in his will that, failing our caring for his son, or in the event of its not being expedient that we should continue to do so, we were to urge you to accept the task.

"We sincerely trust that you will be able to accept it. In any case the boy must be removed from Canada

for his own safety, and by the time this reaches you he will be in England. We may add that Mr. Kidman arranged that a thousand pounds a year should be paid, quarterly, for the boy's keep, and that, in the event of his coming beneath your roof, one of our firm should retire from the trusteeship, and you be elected. We shall anxiously await your decision.'

"There," gasped the Colonel, taking a deep breath.

"A poser," agreed Mr. James. "You took him."

"I'm sufficiently well-to-do to be able to ignore the payment. As a matter of fact I have invested three-fourths of it yearly for the boy. I wired the firm. My sister, who lives with me, was delighted. The house was turned topsy-turvy promptly.

"And?" asked his listener.

"The boy arrived. We took to him. He has become like a son—a dear, fine, high-spirited fellow. But everything has not gone on exactly smoothly. Remembering the need for caution, though in this country it seemed hardly necessary, we carefully guarded the boy. An attempt was made four years ago to kidnap him. Fortunately it failed; but it was a warning. That is why I say some responsibility will rest on your shoulders now that he has become enrolled amongst the scouts."

"But," asked Mr. James after a thoughtful pause, "why this second attempt to kidnap the lad? For what reason?"

"Ah, there you ask me a poser!" came the answer. "The half-brother was a waster, a ne'er-do-well. Kidman, who, as you have heard, was a very wealthy man, left all to his son, with, as I have learned since, a handsome legacy to his married sister. The latter died in Canada, and in spite of every effort on our part we have failed to trace her husband. It's a singular little story, isn't it?"

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"It is," agreed Mr. James. "I suspect that that half-brother is at the bottom of these attempts at kidnapping. But, let us suppose that he were successful, and the boy died; what then?"

"You have struck the very crux of the matter," cried the Colonel. "Failing the boy, Kidman's money goes to the half-brother."

Mr. James nodded his head vigorously. "Then suspicion becomes certainty," he said deliberately. "The name of this man?"

"Anderson; a rascal, or I'm mistaken."

"Then I promise to accept this responsibility. While Tom is with us I will have a special eye kept on him. He'll make a splendid scout, and in a year's time, if this Anderson attempts to molest him, I prophesy that our young friend will be well able to protect himself. Raines's case is a fine illustration."

They parted with a complete understanding, and thereafter, when Tom was out with the scouts, there were always Dick and Billy told off to watch him.

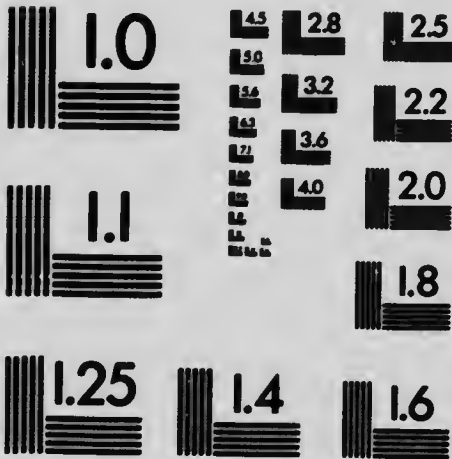
"Don't let him know what we're doing," said Scoutmaster James, taking the two lads into his confidence; "it might annoy him; but be on the lookout. That'll be no great difficulty, seeing it comes into the training."

But the summer holidays went, and the winter came, without a sign of trouble from this man Anderson. Elsewhere the horizon was not so clear, for Raines and his gang of ruffians were far from friendly.



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CHAPTER VI

Spoooring in the Winter

It was a winter for scouts, if it did not exactly suit the old people of Slimington; for the valley, with its long main road crawling through it, the hills on either side, and the whole country was covered deep in snow. It had been freezing, too, and in consequence the white covering was crisp and hard, and sparkled and glistened in a manner which, when the sun shone strongly, as it did after Christmas, made the eyes ache.

"Just the weather for scouting exercises," said Scoutmaster James one morning, when all were gathered within the tin drill hall. "To-day I will lead a party out from the village, path-finding. We will draw lots who shall lead the way and act as hares. The others will have every bit as good fun. Now, let us tear up some strips of paper and number two of them."

Let the reader imagine the eagerness with which their preparations were made, and the buzz of chatter and conversation as the strips were put into an open box and passed round. Matters were going well for the scouts, and, now that the holidays were on, and boys back from school, the tin hall threatened to be too small to hold them. For the defeat of Raines, and the coming of Tom Stapleton, together with the handsome present made by the Colonel had given to a popular movement a singular fillip. Forty boys had

joined since the summer, while five more patrols had been formed.

"Making in all ten patrols," said Mr. James, counting them on his fingers and enumerating the distinguishing badges of each separate one. "What we want now is some bigger lads, such as Raines and Franklin. We want more patrol leaders, and I am a believer in having them of a more advanced age, say sixteen to eighteen, and in any case scoutmasters are the better for being older. But we shall get them—not those two rascals though, I fancy."

He recollected that the police had intimated to him but a short while before that they had their eyes particularly upon that unlovely couple. Things had gone so far with them, indeed, that Raines and Franklin were suspected of having participated in a poaching affray, in which a keeper had suffered serious injury. Then, too, the circumstances of a robbery some five miles away still lay beneath a cloud.

"Not as I suggest as they had something to do with that," admitted the Sergeant. "But there you are, Mr. James. In a village of this size, large though it is, it is the duty of a constable to know the character of every inhabitant. You can't live here long and get about making quiet enquiries without learning that them two ain't up to no good. They're too fond of hanging about the beershops for my liking, and then they've taken up with some of the older men who've had not the best sort of reputations this many a year. They ain't interfered with you again?"

The Scoutmaster shook his head vigorously.

"Not that I had not my fears after that fight," he said; "for our lads showed up well. Besides, no doubt the youths in the village have learned something of our movements. Tom Stapleton isn't the

only one who can look to himself; there are others now who could give a good account of themselves if any young hooligans attacked them."

The information had, indeed, leaked out. Leaked is hardly the word, for when there are some eighty eager youngsters to bear the tale home, it is sure to spread broadcast, particularly in a village where amongst a certain class gossip is the order of the day.

The tin drill hall had seen many changes in those last few months. Again, thanks to the Colonel's generosity, gymnastic apparatus had been set up, and once a week an instructor attended in the evening. That was the time when space within the hall was crowded. There were more candidates to learn boxing than the instructor could deal with, and soon Tom and Dick and other elder boys were acting with him. Competitions were organized, the scouts of three neighbouring villages were invited to the contests, and quite a respectable sum of money was obtained by the sale of seats. But it was always Tom who carried off the prize for boxing.

"A fair glutton he is fer the gloves," admitted the instructor, an old soldier by the way. "He don't take any account of a gruelling. I've had him tackling me so rough that I've had to let him have some betwixt wind and water as I terms it. And he's stood some hot blows about the head; but do he care? Not that much!"

Whereat the instructor snapped his fingers, and glanced across at his favourite pupil with no little pride.

Other nights were devoted to practice at the miniature range; so that some of the scouts became excellent shots, while once a fortnight at least Scoutmaster James gave a lantern entertainment, the slides

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being borrowed from the headquarters of the movement.

But who could expect scouts to remain indoors when snow covered the ground, when the ponds were frozen almost to that stage when they would bear? Besides, there was already a toboggan slide on one of the hills, and there, of an afternoon, the fun waxed fast and furious. Above all, this was the weather for real scouting, when the village paths were massed with spoor, and when anyone of an observant mind could not walk a dozen paces in the foot-marked snow without setting his wits at work.

"That's old Giles Amer's hoofmark," Dick had declared that very morning with unusual emphasis, stopping over a mark. "Can't you see him walking? Little steps, feet placed wide apart, toes turned right out. And don't he mostly seem to walk on his toes, like a cat hopping along on hot bricks? That's Giles's mark to a certainty."

But the business of drawing lots was a serious one.

"Do not open the papers till all have drawn," called out Mr. James. "Now, has everyone had a paper?"

There was a chorus of ayes from the throng.

"Then open. Who's drawn the lucky numbers?"

"I have one: Hooray!"

It was Dick, Dick with his usual good fortune. He held his arm high in the air, the paper fluttering from his fingers, and looked eagerly across at Tom. If only his bosom pal were the other lucky member, what a dance they would lead the scouts!

"And number two?" asked Mr. James.

"Here, sir," came from Tom, his face aglow with pleasure.

"And I may say that I'm sure we're all glad, for the simple reason that scouting will not be made too easy. I rather fancy that Tom and Dick will give us work

to do. Now, lads, we begin operations at once. We give these two, whom we will call dispatch runners, half an hour's start. They are to head away from the village, and must go to a distance of four miles; then they return. If we can track them back exactly we shall have done well. If they can hide their spoor, we lose and they win the contest."

"And we can go as we like, sir?" asked Dick. "Tom and I have been practising on skis. I'm used to them, and can get over the ground. The snow is splendid just now for ski-ing.

"Go as you please, in boots, or snowshoes, or on skis," came the answer. "The only stipulation is that you keep together."

Ten minutes later the two who were to lead the game slipped away from the hall and trudged up the centre of the village street, from which a wide track of snow had been cleared. They were dressed in their scouts' uniform, wore thick boots and sweaters, while over their shoulders was strapped a pair of those long, wooden runners known as skis, on which one who is expert can make rapid progress on descents, and can cross the level parts much quicker than a man who is without them.

"Of course the instant we step out of this track we give the show away," said Dick as they trudged along. "That can't be helped; but what we want is to get an advance of time, if possible. The best way to do that is to bother them at the very beginning. Supposing, now, we make for the toboggan slide, and climb the hills there. There are heaps of tracks all round, and ours will want some finding. What do you say?"

"Excellent! We'll get to the top, leaving tracks as plain as possible. Then the thing to do will be to put our skis on just where the toboggans start. It'll want

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doing, coming down the run, but we must manage it, cut down the hill, and then away to left or right at a point where the snow is badly trodden."

They pushed on at a rapid pace till at the far end of the village, when, taking no pains to cover their tracks, they stepped into the snow and crossed to the foot of the hill, leaving clear marks behind them.

"An Indian would follow that spoor blindfolded," observed Dick. "We'll see how the other part of the programme turns out. Up we go."

Selecting now the track beside the run, where their boots left no particular mark, and where, even if they did so, a scout would have great difficulty in picking them out from amongst the hundreds of others, the two made their way to the top. Then, proceeding, they trudged off into the snow, crossing numerous tracks left by those who had been enjoying the sport.

"Now we walk backwards," said Tom. "And we don't forget to lean forward as much as possible while we're doing it. Otherwise the heel marks will be too pronounced. Righto! I rather fancy that'll be bother number one for our fellows. Now for the skis."

They sat down in the centre of the spot where the toboggans were started, and quickly secured the skis to their feet. On the way up they had been careful to decide where they would leave the track, and had selected a spot where a stream of villagers had trampled the snow for quite a distance to one side of the run.

"I'll give you a lead," cried Dick; for he was thoroughly at home on his runners. "If you come a flopper, let yourself roll, and get up well away from deep snow if you can manage it. Here goes. Ain't this a business!"

It was, in fact, no easy matter to negotiate the slope, for just here it was like the roof of a house. Dick set his feet in the required position, leaned on his stick,

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and was away in an instant. He sped down the ice slide like a streak of lightning, wobbled over some rough stuff, recovered wonderfully, and then shooting off at the appointed spot he went glissading along the side of the hill. Turning his skis a little upward, he swooped towards the ridge until, his momentum being exhausted, he came to a gentle stop. It was Tom's turn. He faced the task with courage; he was off. The run simply flew away beneath his feet; that rough part, where blocks of hard snow had frozen into icy ridges, seemed to rush at him. It smote the fore end of his runners, an unfriendly hump turned his right ski aside, and his feet were dragged asunder. No power that he could exert could arrest the movement. He wobbled, leaned heavily on his stick, and fought frantically to regain his equilibrium. Then he came a howler. Tom pitched headforemost on to the track, and went rolling and rolling down the slope, himself and his skis inextricably mixed and revolving together.

Hurt? Not a bit of it! Who gets hurt ski-ing? Runners may get broken, it is true, but damage to the person, hardly ever. Tom was up again. It wanted doing, that clambering to his feet, for so soon as he had contrived to get his weight poised on one of the runners, it promptly slid away from beneath him. But he managed the task, and once more sped downwards. Then he negotiated the bend, shot out over the tracks and snow, and came to a halt within ten yards of the grinning Dick, puffing with his exertions.

"Well," remarked the incorrigible Brown, "of all the purlers I've seen that was amongst the finest. It would have made a grand slide for a moving picture. Expresses weren't in it: hurt?"

Tom shook his head vigorously. He was fighting for his breath.

"Shook up a trifle? Dinner a little upset?"

Tom lifted his stick threateningly.

"Ready to come along, or want a blower?"

"In a minute. My, that tumble shook me to pieces! I've never had such another; I couldn't believe that a fellow could fall like that and not break something."

"But you should just see 'em ski-jumping," said Dick. "I've watched a chap no older than we are come down a run steeper than that, and take off over a jump the height of which would make the ordinary fellow's hair curl. I've seen him cover fifty feet, land on the front ends of his skis, and then come a most frightful howler, his cap shot in one direction, his arms in all places, and his body and his runners tied into forty knots. Was he broken? Don't you think it. Got up and laughed; then had a second shot. My, ain't it ripping!"

They paused only long enough to allow Tom to regain his breath, and then, tying skins beneath the runners, set off up the hill, gaining the ridge after a struggle. And here they found themselves upon the virgin snow. There was not a mark upon it. The white carpet of glistening material stretched on and on, unbroken save for a furze bush here and there, where the wind, catching it, had sent the load of snow toppling off. The view down into the valley was simply magnificent, the trees laden, deep shadows along their edge, the houses tottering as it were beneath the load, and down in the centre the ribbon of road, thinner than of yore, marked by zigzag ruts, by numerous footmarks, then, as it extended from the village, by wheel tracks, and by trampling of hoofs alone.

"Of course we make for the road eventually," said Dick. "That'll dodge them. If we strike off across here, giving them a long, clear run that they can easily follow, we shall be helping the fun. But we've this to

bear in mind, we must gradually edge off towards the road; not suddenly, for then they would guess what we were up to."

"And it would help, I suppose," added Tom, "if, when we arrive within reach of the road, we manage to cover our tracks. But how's it to be done? It wants guessing."

"All in good time," came the rejoinder. "For the moment it's plain sailing. It'll take our fellows a little while to get on to our tracks, that I'm sure of. But, seeing plainly that we cut across to the run, they will know that it is somewhere over there that they must search for our spoor across country. They'll find it, never fear, and then they'll follow. Let's get ahead for a couple of miles. By then we may meet something which will give us a chance to throw more dust in their eyes."

They took it easily now, for there was no hurry. Besides, they guessed that the difficulty of picking up their spoor at the beginning would add to their start; so, side by side, chatting, and thoroughly enjoying the exhilaration of the unaccustomed movement, they thrust their way on over the hill. A long belt of wood finally came into view, and, realizing that here was another opportunity, Tom and Dick made directly for it, and having entered promptly stepped out of their skis.

"Because there ain't enough snow beneath the branches," explained Dick. "We've got to bamboozle those chaps of ours, and this, I guess, 'll do it. Keep clear of the patches of snow as far as you can, and let us hold on in the same direction. We'll put on our skis again at the far side, cut right off, and then play a game that'll worry the fellows."

It was delightful work planning it all out, and here Dick was in his element.

"When I was in Canada," he said, "I used to go

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off whole days on snowshoes. There was a young Indian living some ten miles from us. He was sort of civilized, as many of them are, of course, in these days, and employed his time in acting as a guide. In the winter he'd lead you after moose, in the summer for fishing. Well, he and I did lots of trips with Father; and even though he knew there was nothing to fear from others, the fellow couldn't walk on blindly. He was alway hiding his tracks somehow, always squinting ahead, and for ever blazing the trees to give him the return direction. We'll play a dodge he taught me."

They stood still for a while to discuss the matter, then, retracing their steps to the point where they had entered the wood, they advanced once more in the old direction. Only, on this occasion, in place of avoiding patches of snow, they took care to leave their tracks quite clearly. In fact, once a scout had followed the ski marks to the wood he would have no difficulty in perceiving that the runners had been removed and that the spoor left by the leaders' feet went straight on before him. On the far side he would come to runner marks again, for here Dick and his friend donned their skis once more.

"Now right on," said the former. "Put your best leg forward; we musn't lose time."

For half a mile they slid over the snow as fast as they were able, Dick leading the way. Gradually, as they went, he inclined away to the left, so gently at first, in fact, that those who followed would hardly be even suspicious. Then he suddenly curved round, and in a minute the two were making back to the wood, their line almost parallel to the other, but three hundred or more yards away. And thus they continued till they reached the edge of the cover.

"Skis off," commanded Dick. "Tread ever so care-

fully, particularly when you come near to and cross the old tracks. Don't walk too close to me."

It was a fine scheme, and filled them both with elation, for here was a turn which would delay their followers in any case, and which would tax all their scouting instincts before the spoor was finally picked up again.

"It's all playing the game," said Tom. "Almost wish I were following. It'd be fine to have to work the difficulty out; and won't the fellow who first discovers the ruse be pleased with himself!"

"Skis on! March!"

They had crossed the wood by now, carefully avoiding snow patches. Their own earlier marks were plainly distinguishable as they sped across them. But when they came to look back before leaving the wood there was not a sign of their recent passage, save at the very edge, where they had entered the thick snow again, and where the marks of their boots and of the runners lay side by side.

"Good!" exclaimed Dick. "They'll deserve their tea when they've worried through with it. Now off we go along to the top of the ridge and down to the road."

Five hundred feet below them lay the valley, and once they arrived on the ridge they were again able to see every foot of it. There, too, was the road, straggling along with its feeble marking of wheel tracks.

"Two men," reported Tom, whose eyes were of the keenest. "There, at the far end of that wood."

They halted to observe them; for of a sudden two black figures had appeared in the distance, abrupt and prominent in the snow.

"Woodcutters, perhaps," said Dick, watching them. "Having a smoke and a chat at the edge of the wood

before parting for their cottages. Won't be bad to cross our tracks with theirs. Eh?"

Tom nodded. He was watching the men closely. Then he swept his eye up the valley. "A cart," he reported. "Two-wheeled, single horse, red colour; box form I rather think."

"My, don't you notice things, just!" cried Dick; for Tom was undoubtedly a master. From the very beginning, when Dick had instructed him in the art of scouting, Tom Stapleton had shown an extraordinary aptitude. But he was particularly fortunate in the range of his vision and in his keenness of memory and perception. There was not another boy in the troop who could better describe what he had but just obtained a glimpse of.

"Box form, red colour, black harness, brown bag piled on top. Man dressed in black coat, with bright, shiny buttons. Brass on his hat; postman," said Tom abruptly. "Mails from Slimington to the nearest town. Cold job in these days, I fancy. What's his pace? Slow trot, eh?"

Dick agreed. He was envying his friend his power of description, and silently registering a vow to take greater pains himself.

"Helloo! A shout," exclaimed Tom three minutes later, when they had proceeded a little. "Look!"

They stared down into the valley, while another shout came to their ears. Then both our heroes became unusually active. For against that background of snow every movement in the valley was visible. They saw the two figures which had first of all attracted their attention crouching at the edge of the wood, while for the moment the post cart was entirely hidden. But as the shout reached them it came into view, and distinctly they saw the driver raise himself in his box seat and flourish his whip overhead. Then suddenly he lurched

forward, shot over his falling horse, and at length lay huddled in the snow.

"Goodness!" exclaimed Tom. "What's it mean?"

"Can't you see? Robbery. Come along quick!"

Dick led the way. He moved swiftly to the edge of the ridge, slid over it, then, taking a diagonal course, he went shooting downward beautifully poised on his skis, slightly leaning on his stick. Tom went blindly after him, slid over the ridge, and went shooting down till he lost his balance. The thick, billowing snow caught him in gentle arms, and at length he rose again, white from head to foot, but keener than ever. He was off again in a minute, and within a little while was back on the track, bearing rapidly down on Dick.

Meanwhile events had followed one another rapidly in the valley. The two men whom our heroes had at first observed had waited only for the fall of the horse and the accident to the driver. Then they had dashed from their cover and raced towards the cart. Dick, as he sped downhill, saw one of them launch a blow at the back with some implement which he took from his pocket. Then the door was pulled open, sacks were tumbled out, while the two ruffians bent over them. Robbery was plainly their motive. They slit the necks of the sacks without hesitation, tossed the contents on to the snow, then hastily searched amongst them. Then one of them, happening to turn, caught sight of Dick and Tom. Promptly he called to his comrade. They threw a number of objects into a sack, which one of them tossed over his shoulder. Then, with a fleeting glance at the two scouts, they took to their heels and raced in amongst the trees.

As for our heroes, they were at a loss for a moment. What were they to do? Succour the postman, or make off at once after the robbers?

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"Cart first," said Tom peremptorily. "Can't leave that man like that. We'll fix the others later."

"I think," answered Dick eagerly, "we'll give up that scouting game, my boy. We've got a pair of hares in front, and you and I have got to catch 'em."

CHAPTER VII

The Trail of Two Criminals

"STEADY!" commanded Tom, as they came within close distance of the post cart and its fallen horse. "Let's stop a moment; if we move about too much we shall be spoiling tracks left by those two rascals. Let's think a little."

On the whole it was a wise proceeding; for the distance which they had had to cover, occupying as it did some few minutes, had allowed both Tom and Dick to realize the seriousness of the matter in which they so suddenly and unexpectedly found themselves engaged. An attack had been made by highwaymen upon the king's post cart. In some way or other the horse had been brought down with a crash, and in front of him lay the motionless body of the driver. Robbery had been committed before their eyes, and, clearly, here was a case for police interference.

"Right!" said Dick, thrusting his hat back on his head, and digging his fingers in amongst his locks. "But I don't think we can do much harm. Remember, we're on skis; the marks will be distinctive. They don't sink into the snow nearly as much as do those made by boots alone. Still, we want to be cautious. This is a job for the police; we have to do everything we can to help them."

"The first thing is to see the man; look here!" cried Tom, taking the lead as if by agreement. "We

can do no harm in front of the cart. Let's go there, and have a look at the poor fellow. He may be dead, for he lies without a movement. Then there's the horse. He's struggling; best take him out of the shafts."

They made their way cautiously to the front of the cart, bent over the postman, and gently removed him to the side of the road. His body hung limply in their hands, his head lolled back so that Tom was forced to support it, while his face was of an ashen whiteness. It was the first time in either of their young lives that the scouts had ever been brought in contact with such a condition. For the moment they were awed.

"Dead?" asked Dick in a whisper.

Tom lay sideways on the snow; for to kneel with skis on was an impossibility. He placed his ear close to the postman's mouth, and then his hand against his lips. There was not a sound; not a breath came.

"Dead, I think," he said solemnly. "It's freezing; if he were breathing we should see the vapour. I fancy his neck must have been broken. Wait a moment; don't move."

He opened the man's coat, turned aside the inner coat and the waistcoat, and, having kicked off his skis, leaned down and placed his ear on the chest. His face was very white and serious as he looked at his comrade. Gently he replaced the covering and straightened the limbs.

"Dead," he nodded rather than spoke. "Must have broken his neck. There's not a heartbeat, I'm certain."

They stood looking solemnly at the poor fellow for some moments. The sight of such a tragedy seemed to have brought them suddenly to a full stop. In their anxiety and pity for the postman they had forgotten the robbers, the rascals who were the cause of his death.

"Poor chap! It was awfully sad," said Dick at

last, breaking the spell. "We can do nothing more for him."

"No." Tom shook his head sadly. "Nothing," he said. "Look here! That's how it was done."

There was the broken stump of a pine tree a little behind them, from which part of its covering of snow had been shaken. And there Dick saw the end of a rope. He could trace the cord running across the road through the snow, and saw that a coil of it was entangled in the feet of the fallen horse.

"Let's see to the beast now," said Tom. "I fancy he must have been half-stunned; he seemed to go down right on to his head. Cast the harness clear, then we'll pull the cart back an inch or so. We can't help it; it must be done. He'll be getting up in a moment, and then there'll be trouble."

Dick kicked off his skis promptly, and went to the animal's head, sitting down upon it. Tom at once proceeded to unbuckle the traces; then they dragged the shafts clear and tilted the cart back.

"Better not shove it back if we can avoid doing so," said Tom, his tones cautious. "Now, he's clear; let's rouse him."

Taking his stick, Tom prodded the beast, while Dick held to the bridle. And in a moment they had the satisfaction of seeing him rise to his feet. The poor beast seemed dazed; he stood unsteadily, rocking his head, his nostrils drooping towards the ground.

"Feeling a bit shaken, no doubt," said Dick. "I'll hook him to the front of the cart. Vote we shove the skis on again."

"And look about us and think. This job wants care in its management. Look here, Dick, there are two things to be considered."

"Eh? Yes. What are they?"

Tom stood to his full height, his skis now secured to

his feet. He took a few steps to one side, from which point of vantage he was able to see the back of the cart, and the exact spot where the robbery of the mail bags had taken place. The latter, some five of them, lay in a heap, while the one which his keen eyes had perceived from the vantage point of the ridge, reclining on the roof of the cart, was now hanging over the end, the tilt of the vehicle having almost displaced it. On the snow, amongst numerous footmarks, and close to the bags, were a number of letters of every sort and size, and of many colours. There were parcels, too, scattered here and there, some almost buried beneath the universal white covering. On the right, coming towards and right up to the back of the cart, was the spoor left by the two robbers—the tracks left by two pairs of heavy boots.

"With big nails in 'em," observed Tom aloud. "Fairly heavy men too, one of 'em bigger and heavier than the other. See, one pair of marks is broader and longer."

"And the left boot of the other chap had lost a protector from the toe. It's as clear as possible."

Dick leaned over the marks, taking care not to damage the impressions with his skis. He pointed triumphantly to the left depression made by the smaller pair of boots. The soles of this pair undoubtedly had been armoured with crescent-shaped shields of metal, and that protecting the toe of the left boot was absent. It was a clue, a valuable clue, one likely to be of the utmost importance.

"Can't make anything of the heel marks," he said. "The snow is hard frozen and doesn't bind, but in spite of that it was balled up under the weight of the heels. That toe gives one of 'em away nicely. Nothing extra special about the other."

"Nothing," admitted Tom. "Now, look here.

They came to the cart along this track; they left by that. They hid up in the wood; we saw them skulking at the edge, where they'd be in deep snow, and here's the line they took on their way back. There's no difficulty about following them. That would be easy; but we've got to remember that they will do all they can to cover their tracks. They might be apprehended to-day; that'd be all right. On the other hand, they mightn't; that'd be a job, and if it turned out like that these marks would be of the greatest consequence. Seems to me the snow's hard enough to give a casting. In any case a photograph could be taken. Dick, I've a proposal."

As he spoke he craned his neck and glanced upward at the ridge, and then along the side of the wood through which the road ran. He seemed to be thinking something out, to be forming some plan.

"Eh?" asked Dick in his short way. "What's the order?"

Good scout though the latter was, he had learned long ago to respect his companion's acumen. He had seen clearly that Tom was gifted with a better head; he could argue things out more logically. He had proved the point many a time, for of an evening, when the scouts met for debate, it was Tom Stapleton who showed a gift for oratory, and who tied his opponents into knots with his arguments.

"I've got a proposal. Our chaps will be coming on to the skyline soon, if they haven't passed it already. If they have, that's bad luck. If not, you can stop 'em—signal to 'em, attract their attention; get them down to help you."

"Yes, that'll be easy if they haven't passed the ridge," agreed Dick. "What then?"

"Report to Mr. James; advise him to throw a ring of scouts round this place, for there may be a crowd any moment. Send another lot along to the far edge

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of the wood, where those rascals are sure to have broken out from cover. I'll look for the spot and mark it, then I'll push on to the village. I'll call the police, and get hold of a photographer. Got it? We shall have to be slippy, the light will soon be going?"

Dick had grasped every detail.

"You get off," he said in a business-like voice.

"I'll manage our fellows. Give you an hour to return. Meanwhile, even if our chaps haven't turned up, I'll see that this place is not disturbed at any rate."

He nodded to his comrade, and shot off over the snow towards the ridge; but, though he looked closely, there was not a figure in sight on the skyline. A clear, unbroken edge of snow marked the summit of the height, giving to the line a smooth rounded appearance, which this abrupt cliff lacked on other occasions.

"Not there," he thought. "The chances are that it has taken them a time to discover our spoor away by the run. They'll be coming soon. Some of them are sure to have their eyes about them."

Dick went off at once to a spot where the hummocked snow told him that there was underwood, and, kicking it aside with his runner, carefully selected some dry twigs from the centre of the bushes. An armful of wet wood provided him with all he wanted, and at once, returning nearer to the stranded cart, he brushed the snow aside on the top of a little knoll, laid his sticks, and soon had the flames licking round them. Ten minutes later a dense column of black smoke was ascending into the frosty air, and, carried by the wind, was wafted towards the ridge on which he hoped to sight his comrades. Nor was it long before a straggling string of figures appeared to view, clambering along the height. Dick watched them, and sent them a loud halloo, which carried far through the stillness.

"Good!" he exclaimed, seeing the front of the line

Tom Stapleton

come to a halt, while figures till that moment unseen came hurrying up to it. "That will be Scoutmaster James in advance. He'll quickly see that I want him."

Placing himself well away from the fire, in the open, where his own figure stood sharply outlined against the snow, Dick at once proceeded to signal a message.

"Something happened; come down here at once," he sent. "Keep well to your right, away from the road, till you get opposite to me, then come straight on."

Mr. James read the message with apprehension. His eyes were fixed on the solitary figure, for as yet the wood through which the road ran kept the cart and horse out of his vision.

"One of them alone," he said, his mind filled with misgiving. "I should say it was Dick. Where's Tom? What has happened?"

At once his busy brain engaged itself with the question.

"Another attempt to kidnap the youngster," he groaned. "I ought to have been more cautious; I should have borne the Colonel's warning more in mind. Not that it seemed possible that anything could happen. I do hope it's nothing serious."

He called the scouts about him, left a patrol leader at the spot to direct the stragglers, then dived down from the ridge and led the way towards the fire, beside which Dick awaited him. Nor did he omit to follow the signalled directions.

"Well," he demanded, coming up at a furious pace. "What is it? What has happened? Where's Tom?"

"In a moment, sir," said Dick. "But, first of all, let the scouts fall in. There's a serious matter here. See that cart?"

The Scoutmaster had done so. His eyes were fixed upon it wonderingly.

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"Horse down; man thrown off: how did it happen?" he asked. "Scouts, fall in over here. Quick! there's work before us."

"The horse was tripped by a rope drawn across the road," explained Dick. "Tom and I saw everything as we stood on the ridge. Two men were hiding there at the edge of the wood. We watched the post cart enter at the far end. It came out, and almost at once there was a shout. Down went the horse, while the postman was thrown clean over the beast's head. Then the men ran up, broke in the back of the cart, pulled the bags out, cut them open, and, catching sight of us, bolted."

Mr. James drew a deep breath. He followed Dick across to the poor fellow lying so quiet and still on his back, and, like Tom, he kneeled down beside him. But he needed to make no examination; the man's face showed that he was past all human help.

"Dead," he said hoarsely. "This is very serious. Robbery, accompanied by violence, which has resulted in the death of a public official. Where's Tom?"

Dick explained quickly. He pointed to the tracks left by the men, and gained his Scoutmaster's approval when he emphasized the fact that the left-boot impression of the smaller of the rascals had a distinctive mark.

"Excellent!" exclaimed Mr James. "I see you have been careful to keep clear of the tracks. You have taken the horse out of the shafts, and have left the rest undisturbed till the police come. Tom's gone for them?"

"Yes, sir. He believes the snow is hard enough to give us a plaster-of-Paris cast of those footprints. He struck off along the road, with the intention of looking for the spot where the robbers left the wood, for you can see for yourself that when they were dis-

Tom Stapleton

covered they turned at once into it. He will mark the place, then he goes on to the village, where he calls for the police, and gets the services of a photographer."

"Beautifully planned," said Mr. James, glowing with enthusiasm. "And now, you called us down here for some purpose?"

Dick admitted the fact. "We led you a terrible dance back behind the ridge," he smiled. "But as soon as this thing happened we decided—that is, Tom did—that you should be called, and the matter reported to you. He suggested that you should throw out a circle of scouts to protect the footmarks, for he thinks a crowd will come as soon as the news reaches the village."

Scoutmaster James threw himself into the work with a zest which showed his keenness. He wasn't at all afraid that the scouts would not prove useful, but he was determined that a work so well begun should be well continued; that every effort should be made to help the police and bring the miscreants to book.

"Kinchin," he called, and when the latter stood before him, saluting, "you will take Dick and Billy with you. Act under Dick's guidance; he will tell you exactly what has happened. Strike off along the road, pick up the spoor for which Tom has been seeking, and follow it. Leave marks at prominent places, or at turns, so that we may follow. Here's money; you may have to be away all night. Go! quick! It's serious."

They were off within the minute, Billy and Kinchin puzzling their heads, and Dick taciturn beside them. They cut round in front of the cart, gained the road, and then set off down it at a smart pace which promised to carry them through to the far end of the wood within ten minutes.

Scoutmaster James had by then addressed his troop. Ranging them in a circle about him, he first explained exactly what had happened. Then he pointed out to them the importance of preserving any footprints, and showed them that they might here be of the greatest assistance to justice.

"I shall post you in a wide circle round the cart," he said. "Don't tread about too much, and in any case keep clear of the tracks left by these ruffians. If you are cold, flog your sides with your arms, stamp your feet to keep them warm and comfortable. If a crowd comes, request the individuals to keep back: tell them the importance of it. Sensible people will at once help you; for obstinate persons I shall have a remedy."

He posted them himself, and then set four of his patrol leaders the task of keeping the circle, and of guarding it against intrusion. That done, he led a small party down the road, found the spot from which the robbers had broken cover, and at once set a guard over it. His preparations were hardly completed, and he had cast a last glance in the direction of the trio of scouts, Dick, and Kinchin, and Billy, who were moving fast away towards the opposite height, when there came the dull drone of machinery. A hooter sounded, and a large motor car came into view. In the back of it, wrapped in a leather rug, for the wind blew keenly, was Tom, his arm waving. In the driver's seat was the Colonel, the sergeant of police beside him, while the back accommodated, beside Tom, a constable and the village doctor. The machine was brought to a halt just in advance of the stranded cart.

"The scouts have done well again, I think—eh, Sergeant?" remarked the Colonel, as he descended from the car. "Things, I presume, are exactly as they were when Tom left, Mr James?"

Tom Stapleton

"Exactly; you will have seen what we have done. Did you notice the party I sent off after the men?"

The Colonel shook his head, while the Sergeant looked keenly across at Mr. James.

"You should have been a policeman, sir," he said seriously. "That is just the point which has been bothering me. From what I have seen of the scouts I reckoned that once they got here they would keep things safe. I mean that they would keep clear of the spot where this affair had taken place, and so not confuse matters. Master Tom told me he had located the spot where the men had left the wood. That seemed to end it for the night. We are bound to investigate everything here. We couldn't very well begin a pursuit till that was ended. Your sending scouts after the robbers is splendid."

He set to work with his comrade, scrutinizing everything, measuring footmarks, the distance the cart lay from the wood, and a hundred other matters. Meanwhile the doctor produced a number of tins of plaster of Paris, and with the aid of a can which he had had the forethought to bring with him, he melted snow, made his paste, and took casts of both pairs of impressions. But his first duty had been to look at the postman.

"Broken neck," he said, confirming Tom's theory. "This will be a hanging matter."

Before darkness fell that evening the two constables, with Tom beside them, had made off after Dick and his friends. They left the Scoutmaster with the Colonel and the doctor to arrange other matters. Quickly the dead man was placed in the car and driven to the village. A couple of scouts put the horse into the shafts and drove in the same direction, while the doctor and Mr. James marched back to the drill hall beside the troop of scouts, discussing the matter as they walked.

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That night, just before the hour for closing the post office, a telegram arrived for the Colonel. It was from Tom Stapleton, and came from a spot nearly ten miles away.

"Traced the marks to canal here," it read. "Lost them utterly; waiting to investigate to-morrow. Please come over."

"Please heaven it will continue to freeze hard tonight and no snow will fall," said the Colonel earnestly, "else the task of tracking those villains will be a thousandfold increased."

He packed a few things into a bag, took warm clothing for Tom, and on his way through the village called at the houses where Kinchin, Billy, and Dick lived. Then, having gathered likely comforts for them also, he set out in the car.

Behind him he left no little stir in the village of Slimington. There had not been so much excitement nor so much gossip since the famous fight with Haines, while the importance of that event was completely eclipsed on this occasion. As for the scouts, they crowded in the hall, and never tired of the discussion.

"There's one thing about it, anyway," said one of them with unusual emphasis. "The scouts have rather more than a little to do with the matter. Tom and Dick were in at the beginning. They, with Billy and Kinchin, are still with the police, showing that their help is thought no end of. Seems to me there's a chance of catching these beggars."

"You bet," came from another. "They'll be somewhere in the running. Tom and Dick will want a lot of beating."

CHAPTER VIII

A Lesson in Deduction

"Of course the thing isn't exactly regular, sir," said the Sergeant, late that evening, when the Colonel had arrived at the little inn in which the party of pursuers had taken up their temporary quarters. "Cases like these are supposed to be followed up by the police alone, and as a rule there are few outsiders who can help them. But here, well, I don't mind admitting that these scouts are wonderfully useful; Thompson and I never had no training in this tracking."

"And more's the pity," exclaimed the Colonel. "However, it's lucky that you had someone at hand who has had some experience. Even youngsters can be of great assistance."

With that the Sergeant agreed warmly.

"That they can, sir," he said. "I don't mind saying that if it hadn't been for this Mr. Dick here we should have been stopped three times at least. Those men made straight across country, and took in their line every wood they came across. They proved as cunning as ever I heard of. Just fancy, once we lost track altogether of them; but this here young fellow," motioning to Dick, "got nosing around, and seed that the bark was bruised on the tree near which the tracks finished.

"'They've climbed here,' he says, 'and I guess they've dropped somewhere out there.'

"It was true enough; the robbers had jest clambered up, run along a thick branch, and dropped right outside the edge of the wood. We picked up their tracks again there. The third time we lost them they played much the same game, only on that occasion they clambered farther back into the wood, dropped where the ground was rocky and clear of snow, and cut clean back on their tracks."

"Smart!" exclaimed the Colonel. "What happened? How did you pick up the spoor again?"

"He did it," answered the Sergeant, pointing to Tom. "Went up the tree they had climbed, followed the path they had taken, because, you see, the men's boots had marked the bark, and dropped down where there weren't any more to be found. Then him and his mates cast a circle round the place, jest for all the world as if they was dogs, and in a twinkling they had found 'em."

"And afterwards you lost them at the canal," burst in the Colonel. "Tell me how that came about, and what has since happened."

"It's soon told, sir. We followed the tracks—spoor, as these young fellows call it—right up to the edge of the water. They'd evidently seen a boat in that direction, had them gentlemen, and made straight for it. Of course they went aboard and pushed off. There was no difficulty, seeing that the ice is kept broken to allow of water traffic."

"But," interrupted the Colonel, "that left a clue. The boat could be traced. You've enquired about it?"

"Up and down; wired to all the police stations. There are men watching nigh every foot of the canal, We've been along either way to the nearest villages or houses on the canal, and have proof that they made west. They had got a start of nigh ten miles, and must have been rowing desperately hard. We shall

Tom Stapleton

hear to-morrow morning if they've landed anywhere within twenty miles or so."

That was how the matter lay, and no amount of discussion or of worrying could alter it. The robbers had so far made clean away. The discovery of a boat on the canal had wonderfully aided them. All that the police could say was that they had gone to the west, that they had passed the nearest village in that direction, and had still rowed on. It was useless to surmise as to their probable movements when to-morrow might bring certain information, even news of their apprehension.

But the morning came, wintry and cold as ever, without that certain information. There was no trace of the men. They had not passed through a second village clustering about the canal beyond the one at which they had been located, while a thorough search of the canal itself and of its banks for a distance of twenty miles to the west failed to show a sign of the boat or of the fugitives.

"A conundrum," mused the Colonel. "What move will you make, Sergeant?"

There was a somewhat blank look on the officer's face. He scratched his head thoughtfully.

"It wants a lot of consideration, sir," he answered. "Of course the police of the whole neighbourhood, for fifty and more miles around, are on the lookout for two strangers, the smaller of whom wears a boot, the left, to name it, which is good evidence against him. But—but there the matter seems to rest. We've wired all particulars, the morning's papers are warning people broadcast, while the canal has been searched. I'm finished, I believe."

His face was drawn; there was a wry expression on it.

"Stumped," interjected the Colonel brusquely. "It

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is a poser. I'm not surprised that you've come to the end of your tether. Personally I can't see what else one could do. Let's have breakfast and then consider the matter fully."

They sat down together at the big inn table and did ample justice to the ham and eggs which had been provided.

"I suppose," said Dick, speaking into his cup rather than to the company, "it is actually a poser. I've been wondering what I would do if I were in the same position as those men."

"And what is the conclusion you have come to?" asked the Colonel. "Speak up, lad. You've done some scouting in other parts, they tell me. Suppose you and Tom to have been those two ruffians. You embark on a boat on the canal. It is almost dark by then, and there is only just sufficient light to enable the people of the next village to recognize your craft. You cannot stay on the canal unless you find some hiding-place; you cannot land without leaving a track. You can drown yourself, that's true, but that I count out of the reckoning."

"I was thinking there might be a boathouse, sir," said Dick promptly. "If there were, I might choose it as a hiding-place. Sink the boat, dive underneath the gate of the house if that were necessary, and hide up in the roof. If a policeman came to search, I'd sink into the water again, and bob to the outside as soon as he was within."

Across the Colonel's face there came a startled expression. The idea was likely enough; perhaps it was the very plan adopted.

But the Sergeant quickly relieved him. "The constable thought of something similar," he said. "We have information that there isn't such a thing as a boathouse for over twenty miles."

Tom Stapleton

Dick promptly subsided; his active brain refused to provide an alternative. "Besides," he thought, when there was silence amongst them, "the scheme is one sufficiently likely in the summer. In the winter, ugh! It would want a desperate man to do that diving."

"But could be and has been done," added Tom. "My own idea is that they have left the canal at a point much closer than we imagine."

The Sergeant pricked up his ears, while the Colonel paused in the act of lighting a cigarette.

"Yes?" asked the latter.

"I'm waiting," said the former. "You've done right well up to now, Mister Tom, and I ain't above taking a hint from one like you. Jest get it out: what's this you've been thinking?"

Tom hesitated for a minute. It was an irritating way he had, even when debating; but it was a good deal better than to employ that stupid drawl, which had left him since he joined the scouts.

"You see," he began, watching the smoke from his uncle's cigarette, "a canal is a jolly easy thing to examine. That is to say, the banks are under full view, and if there are no villages there is little chance of a man disembarking without leaving some sort of trace when snow is about. It has this additional disadvantage: once off the canal, the robbers would have to strike across untrodden snow. Unlikely I think. Eh?"

"Good! That's a point. Get along with it." The Colonel stared hard at his protégé.

"And the Sergeant tells us that there is no such thing as a boathouse; so that can be put out of court entirely."

"Right again! He gets at it like a lawyer," gasped the Sergeant.

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"So we turn our attention to this village, where the boat was recognized in the semi-darkness. We hear that this boat has not been seen farther on, and since it is not to be discovered in the neighbourhood of the village, we suppose that it has been sunk. Now let us imagine that the robbers knew that people had seen them as they passed this village. Let us also remember that it is quite possible that they knew the locality. Well, then, they had already proved their smartness by their actions when on the snow-covered land. Ten miles of water stretched between them and the next place. It was dark, and bitterly cold. What more natural than for them to row back in the darkness, and sink the boat at a spot where the snow was all trodden. My idea is that they slept in that village, and may be there now."

"Why?" demanded the Sergeant suddenly.

"Because the roads are watched, and they will have guessed that. With snow on the ground there is no way of making across country unless by the roads. That is, of course, if one wishes to avoid leaving a track which anyone may follow. We know that the police and the public are on the watch. It seems logical for a pair of desperadoes to lie hidden for the moment, and to decide to remain without movement."

The suggestion was a matter for debate; neither the Colonel nor the Sergeant ventured on an answer for some few moments. They, too, imagined themselves as fugitives, traced the course they would have followed, and then contrasted it with the scheme which Tom had put so concisely forward.

"Eh?" demanded the Colonel at last, leaning forward and regarding the Sergeant. "Seems to me a particularly likely scheme."

But still the officer of the law would not commit himself. Slower in thought and reasoning than this

old soldier, he wanted yet a little while to look at the matter from every point of view. Then, of a sudden, he leaped to his feet.

"I believe he's got it, sir," he cried. "It's the most likely scheme we've had before us. Seems to me we had better look into it. Those birds might be waiting there just nicely for us to catch them."

"Then let us go. How far is this village?"

"Four miles; in your car we can drive it quickly."

There was excitement amongst the party as they set out from the inn, for, as all considered the matter, the more probable did it seem that Tom's suggestion would provide a solution.

"Then we look into the matter closely, and if we can discover it to be a fact that they landed at this place, we may feel sure that we are close upon them," said the Colonel. "Are they likely to offer violence, Sergeant?"

The officer lifted his eyebrows expressively.

"More than likely, sir," he said. "There's a halter almost round their necks. Men who waylay and rob the king's own servants don't stop at anything."

"Then we must use discretion; remember that, lads."

But, caution or no caution, Tom and Dick had firmly made up their minds that if the opportunity came they would do their best to apprehend the robbers.

"If only because I saw that poor fellow who was killed by their action," said the former. "I'll chance a bullet; if I see them I'll rush in."

Thanks to the Colonel's car they soon reached the village, and at once began enquiries; but nothing more was known of the fugitives.

"We sawed 'em pass through yesternight," said an old bargee standing by the canal, his hands thrust deep in capacious pockets. "Did we see ought else

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of 'em? Not we. They've goned on to Porlington, a ten miles trip. It's there where you'll find 'em."

"We want a boat; can you help us?" at once declared the Sergeant. "A boat and a long punt pole; also point out to us the usual landing place."

"Right opposite ye; there's no other," came the answer.

But once the party was embarked, the constable taking the oars, it became apparent that there were other possible places. There were four flights of wooden steps along the bank of the canal, where it seemed women were in the habit of coming to draw water for washing purposes.

"And at either of which the rogues may have landed," said the Colonel. "We'll probe about with that pole at each of them."

Those ashore must have wondered whether the people occupying the boat were possessed of their proper senses. For they seemed to propel the craft in an aimless manner, while none could guess why the Sergeant stood in the bows and wielded a pole. But at the last of the steps, a foot from the bank, the officer gave vent to a shout of satisfaction.

"Didn't I say as he'd got it, sir?" he cried. "There's something here—a boat, or I'm jiggered."

It was an unofficial expression which served its purpose; for it demonstrated his keenness and excitement, if it did nothing else. Tom also promptly took a turn at the pole, and declared that there could be no doubt about the matter. Then, in order to settle the question, the Sergeant tossed the small anchor with which the craft was provided into the water, and, drawing upon it gently, presently announced that it had come in contact with the hidden object and was fast.

"Pay out the cable then," commanded the Colonel.

"We'll get ashore, where we shall be able to pull better. "If that's a boat we'll soon have it on the surface."

Stepping ashore, the whole party put their weight on the rope, and felt that the object hooked by the anchor was moving. In the end it came away from the bottom with a jerk, and in a moment or two a dark, discoloured gunwale came to the surface.

"The boat!" shouted the Sergeant. "Haul."

They pulled it to the side, gripped it with their hands, and, using all their strength, emptied it of water and managed to hoist the boat on to the bank.

"Bottom smashed in with a hammer. Same hammer as used for beating in the post cart," declared the Sergeant. "Proof that the rascals landed here. Now, sir?"

He addressed himself to Tom, who, satisfied that this was actually the boat they were in search of, had turned his attention to the canal bank and its immediate surroundings.

"Once here," he said slowly, "there was no difficulty. "There are scores of footmarks about. They made their way into the village. I think we can take it as certain that they had no confederates here, no one who would shield them."

"You can't take nothing for certain," came the answer. "But I think you're right. What then?"

"Search the outhouses and stables. Enquire at all the cottages. If that fails, make for the nearest village, taking the road leading from this one. If there are two roads, divide the party, and search for the imprint of a left boot from the toe of which a metal plate is missing."

"Blest if you ain't a Sherlock Holmes," gasped the Sergeant. "The way's as clear as daylight. Some of you gentlemen'll perhaps help me and the constable to make the search and enquiry."

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An hour later, in fact, every corner of the little village had undergone an investigation, with the result that there was no trace to be found of the fugitives, and no word of them."

"Then we take the road; there's only one," said Tom.

Once more aboard the car they set forward in pursuit. But two miles of snow-covered road had hardly been traversed when they were forced to come to a halt.

"Divides here," said the Sergeant, dismounting and seeming puzzled. "Now we look for that impression you spoke of."

Truth compels us to mention the fact that had it been left to the officers alone no trace of the robbers would have been discovered, for the malefactors who were being followed had already proved themselves to be clever, to say the least of it. Hunt though the party might, neither of the two roads branching from the main one leading from the village displayed the impression for which they were seeking.

There was, in consequence, a blank look on every face.

"Stumped," exclaimed the Colonel.

"Foxes!" growled the Sergeant.

"I'm jiggered!" chimed in Dick, borrowing his expression from the senior officer of the law accompanying the expedition.

"One moment," sang out Kinchin, whose wits were at work. "Let's look back here."

He retraced his steps down the single road leading to the village, and his comrades saw him bending low over the frozen snow. Then they heard him shout, and hastened to join him.

"Here, and here, and here," he said with emphasis, pointing eagerly. "There is the trace you are seeking. We'll follow it up."

They stood aside to give him an uninterrupted opportunity. And the patrol leader made the most of his chances. Like a sleuthhound he sped along the road, his face bent low, so that nothing should escape him. Suddenly he shouted and came to a halt.

"It ends here," he said. "This is the last impression: what's this?"

He might well ask the question. It was hard to say what had happened in that immediate neighbourhood, for the snow was greatly disturbed.

"Sat down here," said Dick. "Tired perhaps."

"No, one of them pulled off his boots; so did the other—look.' It was Tom's turn again. He pointed to the marks spread prominently before them. It was clear that the fugitives had at this point divested themselves of their boots.

"And something besides," suddenly cried the Sergeant. "What's this?"

The whole thing became plain in the space of a few seconds. It appeared that the man possessed of a hammer had also a pair of pincers or tongs with him. The two robbers had sat down there in the darkness, and had diligently removed every nail or plate from their boots.

"A clever scheme," admitted the Sergeant. "We're bamboozled."

"Perhaps," said Tom. "Only I think this snow will provide us with further information. A nail driven into the sole of a boot leaves some sort of depression. Let us look along farther."

Turning into the road leading off to the right, Tom scrutinized every inch of the track with the utmost care. But, though many people had passed that way, as the frozen snow bore evidence, and though numbers had obviously been shod with strong boots carrying no

nails, there was not a single imprint which could be called distinctive.

"If you don't succeed at first, try, try again," he hummed. "Perhaps the second road will give us something to work on."

And there, in fact, Tom and Dick, working together for all the world as if they were hounds, discovered that for which they were searching. They pointed excitedly to certain marks, and followed them back towards the spot where it had already been agreed the two fugitives had seated themselves. Tom gave vent to a shrill whistle.

"A regular give-away," he cried. "See here, these are the footmarks of the smaller man. His soles were protected by crescent-shaped pieces, of which one on the left toe was missing. The others had been in position for a long while. Doesn't that impression convey the idea that the surface of the sole was irregular. Eh, Sergeant?"

"I shouldn't have noticed it, I admit," came the grudging answer, as the officer made a close inspection. "But it's true, every word of it. Somehow it's difficult to see what you point out on this white surface. One wants young eyes, which reminds me that I'm getting along in age. Now if the snow was darker coloured I believe one would see the thing easily."

The Colonel, who also had peered at the impressions, promptly went back to his car, and appeared within the minute carrying a small tin in his hand.

"Graphite," he said with a smile of exultation. "Otherwise very finely powdered plumbago. We'll blow a little of this into the marks, and so get the black colour you are asking for—one moment."

He kneeled down in the snow, poured some of the graphite into the lid of the tin, and, holding the latter

Tom Stapleton

just above one of the impressions, blew the graphite over it. Then, not meeting with the success he had anticipated, he returned to the car and came back bearing a brush. It was about three inches in breadth, flat, and composed of the very softest bristles.

"And used for getting dust out of corners and crannies in the cushions," he said. "We'll brush the black in."

The application of this graphite made a wonderful difference. Somehow, before, the glistening white of the snow had made it very difficult to detect differences in the depth of impressions, unless, as the Sergeant had announced, one were blessed with young eyes. But once the graphite was applied the thing was more apparent.

"Right every time, he is," declared the Sergeant. "That's the mark left by the smaller one; I take my davy on it. Now for the other."

When they came to work it out, the imprints left by the other man were as easily recognized. The extraction of many nails had left many depressions, for the work had been done roughly, and the nails were by no means small. The snow had taken a faithful imprint of everything.

"There's enough evidence there alone to convict 'em," said the Sergeant. "This here last chap had two crescent pieces on each heel, but only nails on the soles. Supposing we set to work to collect all we can find. Then, if ever we get hold of the boots, we shall be able to fit nails and plates into their positions again."

They acted on the suggestion at once, and before long had made a goodly collection. Then they mounted the car once more, and set off along the road. Here and there they were forced to stop, for labourers from adjacent farms had struck across the fields to join the road. But Dick and Tom were able to assure their

leaders that none of the marks were those they were searching for. On the contrary, the latter were still to be traced, making on in front in the direction the car was taking. The afternoon was somewhat advanced when they came to a market town, and halted for a moment outside it.

"Tarlinton," said the Sergeant. "This is where we get bothered again. It ain't no use to rely on the police much, for I reckon those men came in last night when other folks were moving about, so that they didn't attract any particular notice. If they went on again without waiting, or started off this morning, then the police will have information to give us. If they stayed in here, we're badly bothered. Yer see," he added, "we've had tracks to follow up till now. What's wanted here will be a full description of the robbers. That's what we're wanting."

They pulled up before the police station, only to be informed that there was not an atom of information. Then, at Tom's suggestion, they ran through to the far side of the town, and inspected the road there, as also those on either side. Nowhere could they discover the impressions for which they were seeking.

The Sergeant removed his helmet and scratched his head with a hand which was numb with cold. The Constable looked at his chief with a glum expression. The Colonel stared hard at Tom and Dick.

"Well, what next?" he asked.

"Separate; search every path and road in the place," suggested Tom. "They're here; we must track them to wherever they are hiding. There's not a moment to be lost, the evening is coming. It might thaw before to-morrow morning."

It might. A change in the weather would be fatal. Promptly they parted company, Kitchin and Billy going in one direction with the constable and the Sergeant,

Tom Stapleton

an agreement having been made that one of the scouts was to accompany each officer, who arranged to separate—while Dick and Tom set off in the opposite direction, their heads down, their eyes searching every corner. An hour later, when they could hardly see the various marks with which the snow was amply provided, Tom gave a howl of delight. He pointed triumphantly to certain impressions.

“Come along quick,” he cried. “We’ve got them.”

They set off along the spoor left by the robbers, following it now with the utmost ease. The steps led to a public house, but the tell-tale snow at the door showed that the men had emerged again. On went the lads. They dived into a narrow alley, entered a yard, and boldly made for a stable standing in the far corner.

“In there,” whispered Dick, coming to a halt as if he were hesitating.

“Where we will apprehend them: there’s no time to lose. If we wait for the police the men might get clear away. Here’s for it—bullets or no bullets!”

Tom took his courage in both hands, realizing that his action was both risky and foolhardy. He walked firmly to the stable, opened the door softly, and entered. Dick, following close on his heels, shut the door behind him.

CHAPTER IX

Run to Ground

"H—h—hush! Not a sound! Listen!"

Tom impressed this caution on his comrade rather by the pressure he applied to one arm than from his whispered words; for even a whisper might be heard. As for the interior of the stable, it was densely dark at first, so much so that neither of the scouts could distinguish their surroundings. But, after a while, when their eyes had become used to the dimness, they could perceive the open ends of four stalls, the tails and heels of three horses, and to the left a door, the upper half of which was composed of iron bars, and beyond which no doubt was a loose box, filling up one corner of the building. A horse neighed, and instantly its fellows followed suit.

"Feeding time," whispered Tom. "Best pretend we're grooms come to see to them. Search about for a lantern; there's sure to be one hanging from a hook in the wall or from one of the beams."

Common sense and his general knowledge of stables told him that the lamp, if there happened to be one in the stable, would be somewhere near the door. And, as luck would have it, his fingers presently alighted on the article he was in search of. He took it from the hook to which it was suspended, stepped into the empty stall, and struck a match.

"There are steps leading up to the loft over there,"

Tom Stapleton

he whispered, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "If they're up there, as I suspect, they will not be able to see the light from this position. Got your staff?"

Dick nodded. "Here," he answered hoarsely. "You don't think——?"

"Yes I do: once we spot them, and they spot us, there's bound to be a scrimmage. I ain't afraid of them, only of any weapons they may have. There's that hammer; so, if there's just the merest sign of fight, I shall go in at them. Eh?"

Dick's deep breathing showed that he had heard distinctly, although it had been a whispered conversation.

"I'll back you up," he said slowly. "If there's a ruction I stick to you like wax."

"Good! look here, there's a bin over there, and a sieve. Open the thing, fill the sieve and take the feed to one of the horses; don't be too careful about making a noise. While you're busy with them, I'll climb towards the loft and listen. See? Got it? Take the lamp."

Dick was just the sort of young fellow to have with one on such an occasion. He did not stop to argue, or to give his own views on the matter. Promptly he dropped his staff, and, taking the lantern, went across to the bin. It stood close to the door of the loose box, and the light as he passed towards it flashed on the lower rungs of a vertical ladder, which clung to the wall and disappeared through a square hole above. Common sense again told Tom that the robbers were located there; but he wanted to be certain.

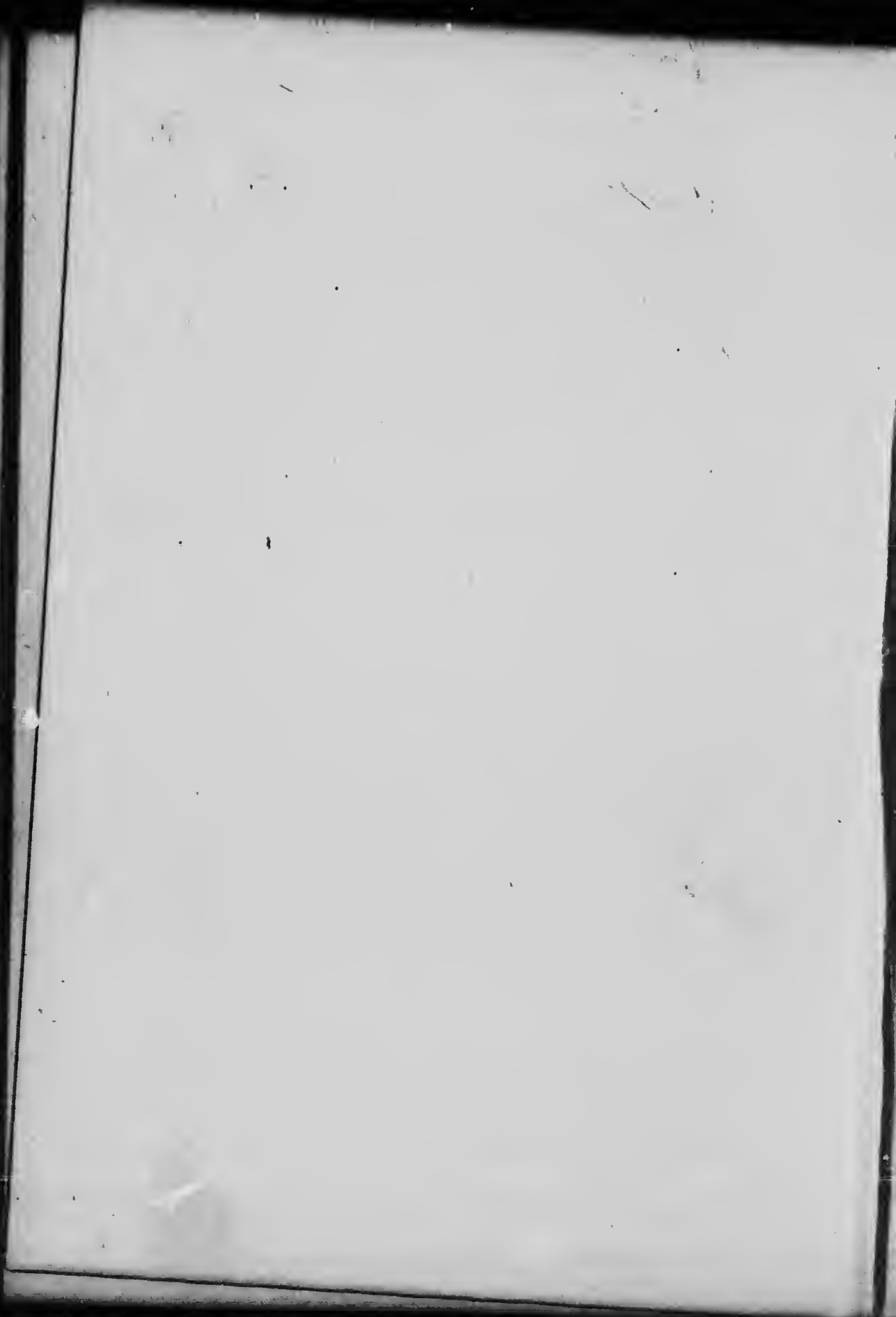
"You see," he told himself, "if they are upstairs in the loft, and we know it for a certainty, then by removing the ladder, or shutting the trap, we have them securely. We can set a watch, send off for the police, and await developments."

He waited a little while to allow his companion to



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get to work, and smiled at his awkwardness. For amongst his many experiences and accomplishments, the care of horses was one which Dick had neglected. And in consequence, when he had opened the lid of the galvanized bin with a clatter, and had filled his sieve, it was with a certain but distinct hesitation that he approached the horses. Then he seemed to have made up his mind to anything.

"Get over there!" he shouted roughly, while the whinnying horse at once obeyed, stamping on the floor of his stall. Dick passed in with the feed, his lantern dangling, patted the brute on the neck, deposited the oats in the manger, and stood again patting the horse. Meanwhile the other two, waiting expectantly for their own suppers, stamped, whinnied, and neighed. Altogether there was sufficient clatter. Tom seized the opportunity. He tiptoed across the stable, grasped the rungs of the ladder, and ascended as softly as possible. In a little while his head was just beneath the trapdoor, and there he rested, listening.

Not a sound came from the loft. There was not a whisper, not even the tell-tale rustle of hay or straw. He waited there five full minutes, and still there was nothing to confirm his suspicions that the robbers were in hiding above him.

"Could he and Dick be mistaken? Was there a chance that they had in some way been misled, that their scouting was seriously at fault?"

The very doubt made him hot all over. It was not that Tom had any special leanings towards the particular profession of thief-catching which he had so suddenly adopted; that was not the point at all. Let us recollect that he and his comrade had been eye-witnesses of the tragedy on that lonely road; that they had seen a man, contented and happy, as the Sergeant had since assured them, a man possessed of

wife and children and wholly inoffensive, killed by the criminal action of two rascals when in the execution of his duty. A scout knows what duty means. It is a thing to be carried out without question, and in the carrying of it out every law-abiding citizen helps. It is only in that way that the wheels of this world keep turning so smoothly. And this poor fellow had not been helped. In the execution of his particular work valuables were placed in his custody, for which he was responsible, and which, like every other public servant, he was prepared to guard, for his position and his honour depended on it. It was the memory of the harsh treatment meted out to him, that and the sorrow brought on his wife and children, which spurred Tom on.

"I've cornered them, I do believe," he told himself, "and it's my duty plainly to see that they do not escape. But I must make sure that they are there. How? That's the question."

He slipped down the rungs of the ladder silently, beckoned to Dick, and took him outside the building.

"Not a sound could I hear," he reported. "But——"

"You're dead sure that they are up there. So am I," admitted Dick.

"See here; there are the footprints, as plain as possible. Well, they all entered by the doorway. There are none coming out, save those which we have made, and these others which are entirely different from those we have been following. Let's have a look round. Here, you stay at the door while I go round with the lantern."

He crept off along the wall of the building, the lantern close to the ground, while Tom stationed himself at the door, and kept a wary eye on a couple of windows; but the latter were closed. Evidently the

ventilation of the stable was arranged for elsewhere. Five minutes later Dick put in an appearance again, coming from the yard entrance and crossing towards him.

"There's a door at the end here, just round the corner," he reported "But it is firmly closed and padlocked from the outside. I climbed a ladder placed against it, and looked carefully. They take in stores of hay and straw there, no doubt. Then I came to the wall of the yard, and used the ladder to clamber over. There's not so much as an opening on the other two sides of the building. If they're there, we've got 'em.

"And none of those footmarks?" asked Tom abruptly.

Dick shook his head. "None," he said. "There's a small paddock on the far side of the yard wall. Not a soul has been through it; the snow was unbroken."

"Then they must be in there. Dick, I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll go back into the stable, take up a handful of straw apiece and pretend to be grooming the horses. After a while I'll sing out for some hay, and you can tell me to go up and fetch it. I'll clamber up into the loft, pushing the lantern before me, and you can hand up my staff. Then I'll have a look round. Perhaps I shall have the luck to catch a sight of them. In any case, I'll get a truss of hay, break it up, and throw it down. If there's a ruction, come up as fast as you can."

"My, it wants caution!" said Dick hoarsely. "I don't like to let you go up there alone. Supposing they attacked you. One to two isn't fair, you know. Why shouldn't two go up for the hay?"

"For this reason. Supposing I catch a glimpse of them, I send the hay down, then slip through the trap and close it after me. Now, imagine that they are suspicious. They make a rush for me. There

is only one to descend; I get through long before they can be on me."

"Won't do—a rotten argument," said Dick emphatically. "There's danger and risk there. I ain't afraid of it, nor are you; but we've desperate men to deal with. We must hunt in couples or not at all. If you climb up there I come too. The plan you've suggested'll do very well, provided you agree to my coming."

It was useless for Tom to argue. In fact, now that matters were placed in this light before him, he could not fail but see the wisdom shown by his comrade.

"Righto!" he agreed. "We both go. But remember this: if you see a leg sticking out from the hay, don't pounce upon it. All we want is direct evidence that those men are above. Once we've secured that we have them. They are bottled—as good as if in prison."

Dick nodded vigorously, and stepped towards the door.

"Don't forget to mask your voice," he warned his comrade. "They'll be listening."

They opened and closed the door after them, Dick commencing to whistle, while Tom hummed a tune.

"Get in at the grooming, mate," he called out roughly. "Won't want much to-night, seeing as they ain't been out all day. Snow's too deep for nags."

Seizing a wisp of straw from the bedding, he commenced to groom one of the beasts, making the customary hissing sound so familiar amongst grooms. Dick following his example, stopped his whistling, so that for a while the only sounds to be heard were their hissing and the stamping of the animals.

"Got any hay down in that empty stall next you?" asked Tom after a while.

"None; not a blade," came the answer.

"Then try the loose box. What's Davy been doin'? His orders is to bring down a truss every mornin'. Ah, I was forgetting! He's abed with a cold. Ain't there none there?"

There came the clatter of a big door opening as Dick pulled at the barred door which closed the loose box. Then the slither of his feet as he trudged across the straw. He took the lamp, and threw the light into the loose box. No, there was no hay there, but— He started back, for in the far corner some straw was heaped up close to an upturned box on which a half-consumed candle was affixed by means of its own meltings. On the straw lay a large piece of bread, with a hammer close beside it. But, even if his suspicions were aroused already, and the sight of a hammer helped to strengthen them, it was not the latter which proved conclusive. It was a brown sack. Not of that coarse material commonly employed for the conveyance of oats; but a sack of a finer, harder material, much crinkled at one end, as a glance told him, and showing at this part a number of red patches.

"Whew! Sealing wax," he thought, stepping across to investigate. "Yes, sealing wax all right; and here are post-office stampings. There's proof enough, if any were wanted. Ah, letters!"

The facts of the case came clearly before him instantly. Here was direct evidence that Tom and he had made no error; for this must be the very sack which the robbers had taken with them, while the scattered letters told their own story.

"Came in here last night," Dick told himself, summarizing the movements of the robbers. "Hid in the loft. Had no need to move, as they had visited a public house and had bought food. Descended as soon as the nags had been fed, and they imagined that the stable was to be left for the night. Came

in here and lit that candle. Took advantage of the first opportunity after the robbery to slit open the letters and extract whatever contents were valuable. Good! It only remains to prove that they are actually upstairs, where, no doubt, the disturbance created by our arrival has sent them."

"Not a blade o' hay," he sang out hoarsely. "Suppose it means a climb. Orders is that we don't take lights into the loft. That'll be awkward. Blessed if I know whereabouts the hay trusses are stored."

"Soon find 'em," answered Tom, ceasing a tune which he had commenced to whistle. "Let's have the lantern; I'll go."

He came whistling loudly towards Dick, his hand stretched out for the lantern. But, to his surprise, his comrade took him by the arm, pulled him into the box, and breathlessly showed him what he had found. Tom nodded vigorously.

"Got 'em," he whispered. "Come along."

They banged the door of the box, crossed to the ladder, at the foot of which Dick posted himself, the two staffs in his hand. Tom placed the ring of the lantern in his mouth, gripping it with his teeth, and promptly swarmed up. In a minute he was clambering through the opening.

"Come and give us a help, mate," he sang out, disguising his voice. "It's plaguey dark up here: we'll have to be careful of the lantern."

Dick joined him in a few moments, and the two at once moved away from the trapdoor. Holding the lantern well before him, Tom scrutinized his surroundings, and presently discovered a number of trusses of hay piled together at a little distance. Promptly he made towards them, and held the light in position while Dick seized a bale, dragged it from the heap, and slid it along the floor to the opening. He cut

through the fastenings with his knife, broke the truss up, and pushed it piecemeal through the trapdoor.

"Was that someone staring at them from the darkness? Was that a face half-hidden behind the mass of hay? Yes. No. There was nothing there. Nothing at all. It was his fancy; it was——"

Tom's breath came fast; he was certain now. He had seen a face in the dimness of the loft, and beside it a second. The robbers were there, watching him and his companion.

"Finished with it?" he asked roughly, endeavouring to steady his voice and disguise it at the same moment. "Best be moving."

Dick already had one foot on the first rung of the ladder. He was descending, when there came a sudden exclamation from the darkness. A dark figure shot from behind the mass of hay into the dim circle of light cast by the lantern, and was followed instantly by another. There was a suppressed shout, a shout denoting anger, and then, before Tom could collect his senses, the men were on him. They were armed with thick sticks, and struck furiously at him with such tremendous blows that had he not leaped aside his head would have been broken. It was too late to retreat. He could never hope to reach the trapdoor and pass through it securely. It was one of those cases where instant action is wanted,

Tom placed the lantern on the floor with a rattle, gripped his staff with both hands, and parried a blow aimed at his head by one of the miscreants. He was only just in time to leap aside before the other struck at him.

"Stop!" he commanded. "We know you: we have traced you. You are surrounded."

"Scouts again. Break 'em up! Smash 'em!"

Oaths and growls came from the two men, whose

faces could not be distinguished in the dimness. But were the voices familiar? Even in the hurry and turmoil of it all Tom had a suspicion. Then the necessity for violent action drove all thoughts from his head. The robbers had drawn back for one brief instant. Next second they came on again. With stakes raised overhead they threw themselves upon him, and had it not been for Dick would undoubtedly have killed him; but the latter had been true to his word. Plucky youngster that he was, he leaped back into the loft, and placed himself beside his comrade. It was his staff which parried a blow meant for Tom's head, and his weapon again which returned the blow with interest.

Crack! It fell on the man's arm, disabling it for the moment. As for Tom, he hardly noticed his narrow escape. The bigger of the two ruffians required his full attention. Indeed it became a personal combat between them. They rushed to close quarters, dropped their sticks, and commenced to pummel one another.

"Best be quiet and come along," gasped Tom. "We've got you."

"I'll kill you! I'll break every bone in your body!"

The man was desperate. He gripped Tom round the waist and dragged him to the floor. Then he rolled towards the trapdoor.

"Heave him through! Break his neck!" cried his companion, standing back to nurse his arm, and watching the contest closely.

"Hands up! Drop that stick!" commanded Dick. "If not, I'll make you."

That spurred the ruffian to renewed effort. He bent his arm to and fro at the elbow till the stiffness had gone out of it, and took firm hold of his stake again.

"You scouts was always a nuisance," he growled. "I'm a-goin' ter fix you."

Crash came his stake on to the floor, missing Dick by a narrow margin. Click it went again, coming in contact with the staff our young hero was wielding. Bang! It broke through his guard, fell on Dick's head, and brought him to the floor with a rattle.

"Now fer you! Ain't I got something ter pay off?"

The rascal followed the other two combatants towards the trapdoor, and made ready to get in a blow at Tom. But for the moment his purpose was frustrated. The two were so inextricably mixed, and their movements were so violent, that one attempt ended in his giving a hard blow to his own comrade. He had perforce to dodge about them, waiting in the dim darkness for an opportunity. As for Tom, gripped round the waist as he was till the breath was squeezed out of his body, he slogged at the back of his antagonist's head with all his might, but seemed to make little impression on it. He was conscious of the ruffian's intention. Already the trapdoor was within a foot of his head, and if only the man could drag him to it, and toss him down, there would be an end of the matter. Rolling, twisting, and floundering across the floor they jarred up against Dick's motionless figure, and swung back again till the lamp was sent rolling. Then our hero managed to get in a stinging blow on the face of his adversary, a blow which forced the man's head backwards, and compelled him to release his hold. It was a chance not to be wasted. He was on his feet in an instant, taking in the surroundings with the swift glance allowed him.

Bang! The second ruffian, manœuvring round, contrived to bring his weapon heavily down on his left shoulder. Tom staggered backwards, escaped a second blow by the skin of his teeth, and then planted his right fist in the man's face with terrific violence, sending him to the floor with a crash. But he was to

receive no respite. The villain who had gripped him so firmly sprang forward again, his intentions plainly to be read by his movements.

"Still means to throw me down through the trap," thought Tom. "I'll keep him at a distance."

He saw the man stoop to pick up one of the staffs, for though the lamp was overturned the candle still burned feebly. Darting forward he was within reach of him in a second, causing him to stand upright. A fist flew within an inch of our hero's head, and almost instantly he returned the blow with interest. It was one of Tom's very own, clean and straight from the shoulder. It took the robber on the chin, and tossed him backwards. It began to look, indeed, as if matters were improving; but only for the instant. He was pounced upon immediately by the other man.

"I'll kill yer," he heard the fellow growl in his ear, while his arms were suddenly imprisoned by the grip thrown round him. Both staggered backwards and forwards. One of them trod on the lamp, and sent it spinning. They nearly fell, Tom still struggling frantically. They lurched to the right, some feet nearer to the trap. The end was coming. Out of the corner of his eye Tom saw the second ruffian pick himself up from the floor as if still dizzy. He was coming to help his comrade. At the sight he made still more frantic efforts. Wrenching one arm free from the grip which embraced him, he dashed his fist into the man's face. But the fellow stuck to him like wax, and, exerting all his strength, heaved our hero still nearer to the opening. Ah! something came in their way. It was the unconscious Dick, lying stunned and without movement on the flooring. They tripped, the two together, and fell right across the trap.

"Finished," thought Tom swiftly, finding himself under his opponent, his head and shoulders through

the opening, and only his legs and the grip of the ruffian holding him up.

"He comes if I go; I'll hold on tight to him."

There was no losing heart at the end of the struggle, no giving in now that all seemed hopeless, and allowing the rascal to toss him down without making another effort. As the robber slipped one arm from his waist and pushed, Tom freed his other hand. The man wrenched his knee into position, and then his foot. He was simply pushing our hero through the trap-door.

Tom felt himself going; the small grip he had with his heels was fast lessening, and his hand slipped from the man's coat. Ah, it was done with! He was falling head downwards. Frantically he gripped at the air; his fingers came in contact with something firmer, and as a dying man adheres to a straw, Tom fixed his fingers on the object. Crash! He landed on the hay below, knocking the breath out of his body. And at the same time he had the vague impression that the man who had so lately gripped him had followed. Yes! No! It couldn't be! He was coming down the ladder. Tom could tell that, for the figure was silhouetted against the flickering light coming from the loft. He must move—must stop the fellow. But, alas for Tom! he was badly winded and shaken. He could not even get his breath back, much less rise to his feet. And the man seemed to know it. He came down swiftly, kicked at our hero as he passed, rushed to the door, and was gone in a moment.

It was not till some five minutes later that Tom could collect his scattered senses, or throw off the dizziness which assailed him. Slowly he became aware of the fact that a cold breeze was blowing upon him, and that the door was open. Then, to his astonishment, the light in the stable seemed stronger. He

could see the horses clearly, and—yes, at his feet, quite still and motionless, the figure of one of the robbers, the very man who had thrust him through the trapdoor. He was wondering how it had all happened, and why the man did not move, when the bright light again attracted his notice. He cast an eye overhead. The trapdoor was aglow. Smoke was pouring through it.

“Fire!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. “Fire! Dick, where are you?”



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“‘ FIRE!’ HE SHOUTED ”

CHAPTER X

The Boy Scouts Triumphant

THE position in which Tom Stapleton found himself was indeed terrible, and to add to the difficulty of it we must remember that he was far from feeling himself. That headlong fall from the loft, broken though it had been by the hay lying beneath the trapdoor, had for all that shaken him severely. He was not sure if he had broken an arm; the limb felt thoroughly useless. Add to the above the fact that his head was whirling and his ears buzzing, and one can gather how fit he was to encounter this new difficulty.

But fires wait for no one. Here it was a case of a hayloft ignited, when the fiercest conflagration was to be expected.

"Fire!" He rushed to the open door and shouted the alarm, repeating it rapidly. To tell the truth, for those few brief seconds he lost his head entirely. He almost bolted from the building, so startled was he and so shaken by the recent conflict and his tumble. Then he remembered his comrade.

"Dick! Dick!" he bellowed. "Where have you got to?"

There was no answer. Not a sound came from the loft. Not a sound? Yes, there was the crackle of blazing wood, intermingled with the frightened neighing of the animals in the stalls below.

"Ah! I recollect; he was stunned. I saw that

beggar knock him over. We rolled against him; he'll be burned to death."

He was at the foot of the ladder instantly, but was forced to grip a rung and hold himself upright by it; for a sudden giddiness seized him. His head swam, and finally he was doubled up with sickness. All his anxiety and eagerness were now of no avail. He was chained to the spot, as it were, bent double, unable to move. Meanwhile smoke poured down upon him, the nags neighed and stamped in their terror, while upstairs in the loft the blazing wood crackled, sending flaring sparks to join the billowing smoke entering the stables. Up there, a few feet from the trap, lay Dick--Dick Brown, his bosom companion, the lad who had supported him in the fight. It was maddening to be held a prisoner through illness. Tom struggled against it manfully, and he prevailed. He lifted his head. The sickness had relieved him, and now that he was upright a great part of the dizziness had gone. Promptly he sprang at the rungs above, hoisted himself up, and thrust his head through the trap.

"He was somewhere near and handy," he told himself. "I shall easily find him."

But he had not reckoned on the smoke. A cloud of suffocating vapour enveloped him at once and set him coughing. That terrible sickness seized him once more, till he was within an ace of dropping. But dogged determination was one of his finest characteristics. He wedged himself into the opening, and, after a few moments, hoisted himself on to the floor of the loft. Then he swiftly tied his handkerchief round his mouth and nostrils.

"Now for it. I'll wait for the smoke to clear a little if I can. Where was he?"

Black smoke enveloped everything. Though he waited, it increased in intensity rather than diminished,

while the dull red flare behind it did not penetrate. But the heat did. It was like an oven up there, a hot oven rapidly becoming like a furnace.

"Can't wait," he told himself. "Must try at once. Where was he?"

That was the difficulty. He could not recollect the exact position, while his brain, muddled by his fall, refused to remind him on which side of the trapdoor Dick had fallen. There was nothing for it but to grope about, and Tom undertook that promptly. Half-stifled, feeling as if his head would burst, and as if he must drop down and lie motionless—so fatigued was he—he still fought on. He crawled this way and that, with method at first, and then, as his want of success became more apparent, in an aimless manner, desperately, as if nothing mattered to him but the finding of his friend. For Tom was a true pal; he would rather have remained up there in the loft and perished himself than allow Dick to become a victim. Then his fingers touched something. It was a boot. He ran them up the leg and came to the body. That was all he wanted; he tugged at once, pulling his friend towards the trap. Then he slid his own feet on to the rungs of the ladder, pulled Dick still closer, and—quite how he was never able to remember—got his listless figure over one shoulder. But the task was not even then finished. It is no easy matter to carry such a weight down a vertical ladder. Tom felt as if his fingers must give way, as if they would be torn from the rungs to which he was clinging.

"Safe at last! Must get him outside!" he gasped. "Then there's the other fellow."

He needed no reminder that there was little time to be lost; and if he had been doubtful, and had imagined that the fire would be confined to the loft alone, there was something down in the stable now to remind him.

Tom Stapleton

For the floor above had burned through over the loose box, an avalanche of burning material had fallen, while every inch of the stable was lit up by the glare. In a measure the light helped him, though the position was now more than ever serious.

Ah! There was someone at the door; someone wearing a helmet. Tom shouted:

"Quick! In here!" he cried. "Carry the two out, then come back for the horses. There's not a moment to be lost."

Help had indeed arrived at a critical instant, and none too soon. Still, it was help, and cheered our hero wonderfully. He stood back against the wall, choking for his breath, while the Sergeant and the constable seized Dick Brown and carried him into the open. Then Billy and Kinchin dashed in and, at a sign from Tom, carried out the fallen robber.

"Now for the horses," shouted Tom, pulling himself together. "Cut their halters and flog them out if they won't move. They're certain to be stupid with fright. Get at it, all of you; I've got another matter."

The very sight of friends and help seemed to have cleared his head and sharpened his wits. In a flash he remembered the evidence Dick had discovered in the loose box, and, seeing now that there were sufficient to manage the three horses, he darted across to the box, flung the door open, and rushed in. Flames were already licking up the straw in one corner, but by a fortunate chance the heap collected by the robbers had not yet ignited, though in a minute the whole place might well be ablaze.

"Sack, hammer, and letters wanted," he said. "I'll have them."

And he was as good as his word. With a jump he landed on a mass of straw which was just igniting, and smothered the flames. Then, careless of the blazing

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debris falling from above, he picked up the sack and hammer, searched for and found a number of letters, and then beat a hasty retreat.

"The horses?" he asked. "Got them out yet? No! Can't you move him?"

There was still one remaining, while the other two were already galloping across the yard. But this one had defied all attempts so far. He stood biting at his manger, the whites of his eyes showing behind him, his ears erected stiffly.

"Can't get near him," reported the Constable. "Lets out every time, and nearly had me. I daren't go closer."

Tom would have dared any day, but strength is required besides courage. His head was clear enough to find a plan, and the discipline of the scouts had already taught him how to give a command.

"Billy!" he shouted, knowing well that that individual had some knowledge of horses. "Get in there by the other stall and climb on the partition. If he won't move, prod him with the hayfork. He'll be caught if he's not out in a minute."

Strenuous times need strenuous action, and the suggestion our hero had made was not to be sneered at. After all, was he the class of lad to practise cruelty? From what he had already displayed of his character to the scouts, was he the boy to inflict unnecessary torture? Let us put the mere suggestion aside at once with complete disdain. Reader, Tom Stapleton had experience of horses. He knew well that a terrified animal can be absolutely stubborn, that even when his life is in the greatest danger he will baulk the efforts of those who would save him. Pain alone might master him, and if not it might drive him to movement. In any case Billy had no scruples.

"Right!" he shouted. "Stand clear of the door,

both inside and out. If he comes, it'll be like a hurricane."

He seized the fork, ran through the smoke into the stall nearest that occupied by the animal, and quickly clambered on top. The beast bit frantically at him. It struck at its would-be deliverer with its fore feet, and hooked one on the top of the manger, nearly causing it to fall. Then it fixed its teeth in the heel of Billy's boot.

"Prod him! Drive him out!" they all shouted. "Look out that he does not upset you."

It was touch and go for a moment. Billy swayed on his dangerous seat, and nearly lost his balance as the animal pulled at him. Indeed, had not Kinchin run forward and held to his other leg, he would have toppled over. But he never lost his head. He thrashed the frightened beast over the neck and head with the handle of the fork and strove to move him. But he might just as well have employed a reed. Then, at a shout from the Sergeant, who warned him that there was no time to be lost, he drove the prongs into the animal's shoulder.

There was a terrific plunging at once. The brute released its hold of him for a second, and then came again in his direction with open mouth. It squealed in its terror and anger, lashed out with its heels, breaking a portion of the stall panelling. Then, as the prongs went in again, it swung round as if on a pivot, let fly at Billy with its heels, and raced through the doorway.

"Hooray! Got him! Well done, Billy!" shouted Tom, staggering outside. "Well done, Billy!"

Ah! The old dizziness seized him. He fought against that horrible nausea, and then, clutching wildly at the smoke-laden air, fell face downward in the snow.

"I knew he was done. I could see it when we first

came in. He's been hurt," said the Sergeant, as he helped to lift our hero. "Here, what's this he's clinging to? A sack, a—— Colonel," he bellowed, catching sight of that gallant officer approaching at a run, "we found young Master Stapleton dead beat in that blazing stable. I believe he's been in the loft. In fact, from what I can gather from all appearances, he and his friend went up there to get the men we've been following. There was a fight, perhaps, and down falls him and one of the robbers. T'other gets clear away, leaving the loft blazing. And this here young hero, sir, climbs up and rescues his comrade. But that ain't all. See what he's got here, clinched so tight in his hands that you can hardly move 'em."

"A sack! But is he hurt? What's happened to him?" asked the Colonel anxiously.

"Nothing; only feel rotten. Fell from the loft," murmured Tom, recovering at that moment. "Can't tell you all now; but we spotted the robbers, and fought 'em. That's the sack they stole; the hammer and letters are in it."

They hurried him to an inn near at hand, where Dick had already been taken, and where a doctor was soon in attendance.

"Concussion, pure and simple," said the latter, when he had examined his patients. "Bed at once, absolute rest and quietness. I'll see them in the morning."

He dressed the nasty wound Dick had received on the scalp, and having again assured himself that Tom had no broken bones about him, went back to his house. As for the robber, he was dead. He had had the misfortune to strike a part of the stable floor uncovered by the hay which had saved Tom so nicely, and the tumble had killed him. It was a quick retribution for what he had been doing.

"And of course the stable was burned out," said

Tom Stapleton

the Colonel, when he appeared in the lads' room on the following morning. "How do you feel, both of you?"

Tom put one leg out of bed and slowly slid to the floor.

"Ripping!" he said feebly. "I'm fit for anything."

"For bed you mean," came the answer. "Get back at once. How dare you! Fit for anything indeed! You nearly went over."

The two had, in fact, had a trying experience. Not that they were inclined to bemoan their luck, or look upon their damages as bad fortune, but the penalty of their adventure was the hardest to bear. Inaction in bed sorely tried them. Then, too, silence was commanded, and that, perhaps, was the sorest trial of all.

"Now we can discuss matters fully," said the Colonel on the following day, when both lads were allowed to get up. First, to get your details. We separated to look for tracks; you two went off together. Well?"

Turn and turn about they told the tale, Tom coming in at the point when Dick was knocked senseless. He described his fall, the escape of one of the fugitives, and then his discovery of fire.

"And then?" asked the Colonel, seeing that Tom had paused.

"Oh, then, er—don't you know?—let me remember," said Tom, hedging. "Oh yes, of course! There were the horses; I shouted for help. The Sergeant came along, with his constable close behind him. And then Billy and Kinchin put in an appearance. Ripping, the way Billy worked that horse!"

"Rot!" exclaimed Dick severely. "You've missed a lot. The Sergeant said he found me in a heap at the bottom of the ladder, and you looking as if you had seen a ghost. You had been ill; you were awfully

shaky. Did I walk down from the loft in a sort of dream, or fly on an aeroplane?"

Tom reddened; he was in a corner. His natural modesty, which did him credit, prevented his mentioning everything. Dick's brusqueness annoyed him.

"You shut up!" he commanded, his words quick and unusually rude for such an occasion.

Dick grinned, an irritating custom if he had but known it. "In time," he said stubbornly. "But I asked a question, Colonel; ain't he bound to answer it?"

"He is bound to tell us all that he has purposely suppressed," came the answer. "Speak out, lad. You've done enough for us to know it isn't bragging."

Then Tom gave them the full details, ending the tale lamely.

"Of course," he explained slowly, "one couldn't leave Dick to cook up there. Besides, I wanted to see how far the fire had got hold in the loft. He was jolly heavy; I wouldn't lift him like that again for a fortune."

There was silence in the room, the Colonel busy with his own ideas and thoughts. He was congratulating himself on having such a ward, and at that very moment was wondering what sort of profession the lad would choose.

"Soldier, sailor, explorer, airman, any one of them would suit him," he thought. "He'll shine one of these days, will this fine youngster."

As for Dick, he could hardly see his old comrade. There were tears in his eyes, tears which denoted gratitude. He looked as if in his rather shaken condition he would break down like a girl and cry. Then Tom glared across at him sternly. He was feeling thoroughly awkward, and never before in his life had

he wanted more to lose his temper. He could see Dick's tears; he was in terror of something worse. What a spectacle if this scout were to actually blubber!

"Dick," he said suddenly, leaning across, and staring hard and fiercely at his bosom comrade. "If you don't shut up and change the subject, I'll—I'll never speak to you again; I'll give you the biggest hiding."

"Stop!" cried the Colonel, taking in the situation. "Boys, not another word about it now. We all understand one another. I'm proud of Dick, and Dick is of Tom. The scouts are proud of both of 'em. Now for other matters. I understand that there was little light up there in the loft. You didn't recognize the robbers?"

Dick shook his head. Tom ventured an answer.

"No," he said doubtfully, "though I thought I knew the voices. But, of course, it couldn't be they. They'd never have the pluck for such a business."

"They, meaning——?" asked the Colonel.

"Raines and Franklin."

The answer did not come immediately. The Colonel searched in his pockets, and presently produced a yellow envelope, from which he extracted a piece of flimsy paper.

"It was the Sergeant's suggestion," he said. "I merely acted on it. I wired to Mr. James two nights ago, asking if those two were still in Slimington. And here is the answer. 'Have been away from home since yesterday morning. Parents will state nothing. Will wire if they return.'"

"And?" asked Tom, vastly interested.

"There is now no doubt about the matter, for the man who is dead is Franklin, while the hammer which you so carefully preserved for us is stamped with the

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name of Raines. It is not proof positive that he was actually concerned, but it is sufficiently convincing."

Tom and Dick had an exceedingly busy time during the following few days, for their evidence was required in two separate quarters. It was necessary for them to attend the inquest on the postman, at which their conduct was highly commended. Then they drove in the Colonel's car to the one held on the body of Franklin. And there they had to listen to more eulogies. Finally, there was a grand muster in the tin drill hall, at which not a single scout was absent. And, strangely enough, at the top of the hall there was quite a gathering of constables. The Sergeant was there, red of face and vastly important, and with him his junior, who had just received promotion for his participation in the exciting chase of the robbers. On a table near at hand were two morocco cases containing a gold watch apiece. Then the Chief Constable of the county called for silence.

"Gentlemen," he said—"gentlemen, officers, and scouts, you know why we are here this evening. We are here to do honour to two young heroes, by name Tom Stapleton and Dick Brown. Will they have the goodness to stand forward."

They were forced out of the crowd: the scouts, the patrol leaders, and the scoutmasters even throw themselves upon the two who had been named and hurled them into the centre of the hall. And then they cheered. How they cheered! The noise of it roused the village, while one old lady rushed from her cottage fearing that there was a fire.

"Bless and save us!" she cried querulously. "What be it?" and when she had been reassured, "It's them scouts again, ain't it? Ay, I knows 'em. So different from boys a few years back. They wouldn't scare an old body if they could help it. They'd more like come

in and help to scrub a floor or do something of that sort. Them two as helped the police getting presents, be it? Well, they deserves anything, bless 'em."

Dick stood before the host of admirers ill at ease. He kicked the floor irritably with his feet, then grinned nervously at Tom. As for the latter, he stood stiffly at attention. He hardly saw the crowd about him, hardly heard their cheers. His mind had strayed back for the moment to that stable and to the sufferings he had endured there.

"It's better to feel and know that you have done decently and won the praise of all, young and old, officers and others, than to have funk'd the thing, or to have slunk away and boasted of what you would have done. I'm glad it all happened."

That was how he felt. Somehow or other he had the idea that that time would be for him the stepping stone to better things, as if it were destined to be a landmark in his life. He felt more of a man now than ever before. There was no fear of his being called a s'ulker.

"You will not ask me to tell you the whole story," said the Chief Constable, as Dick and his friend were driven to the centre. "You all know the details exceedingly well, and those cheers show what you think of your two comrades. What I have to say concerns the police of this county, I might add of the whole country. Gentlemen, there is never a time when we do not want help. Up till to-day we have stood almost alone, knowing, I will admit, that we have the good wishes of the community. But in nasty cases there was no one but ourselves to rely on. To-day that is altered; there are the boy scouts."

"Three cheers for the police. Hip-hip-hip-hooray!"

The scouts drowned his utterance.

"Thank you!" he managed to say at length. "Now

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that the movement has begun, I believe I may say that there are always the boy scouts. I say always, because I believe that this exceedingly fine and fortunate movement will continue and prosper. It is in the hands of the best of men. The Chief Scout has shown himself long since as a leader of scouts and soldiers. But I want to show you how I believe it will be of great help to the police force of the country. This is my reason: it attracts boys, it gives them a fine, manly occupation, it occupies all their idle hours and a great many strenuously busy ones. What is the result? It keeps them out of mischief. It attracts some, those few amongst them, who without such interest and occupation might be led to the perpetration of more than mischief. You follow me? Thus it helps the police. But there is more. It provides scouts, and if you doubt that the police have need of them, cast your minds back to the particular incident in which our young friends were engaged. And now for the last words I have to give. Of what use is a knowledge of scouting if there is nothing else besides? Can you be a successful scout if you have not courage? Can you stick resolutely to an unpleasant duty if you have not experienced discipline? I say most emphatically, no, you cannot. Then why is it that our two friends succeeded so admirably? I will tell you: they put duty first and foremost before them, they carried that out by the aid of common sense and a fine training in discipline, and in addition they faced the risks, shirked nothing, and displayed such courage that we felt we must do something to mark the occasion. These watches were subscribed for by the police of the county. I hand one to each. Let them never forget that when they won these trophies they set a fine example, and were gallant gentlemen. Let them never forget it. Let them keep their armour

bright in the future, and so help to make gallant souls of their comrades."

Did the boy scouts cheer at that? They filled the hall with such sounds that it threatened to burst its walls asunder. Did they make special efforts to mark their approval of Tom and Dick's conduct? Let us assure the reader. They took them shoulder high round the hall and down through the village. They cheered and shouted till both their heroes were deafened. Then, when the meeting was ended, they went home to bed, each the better for the experience, for they had seen the reward that comes to those who are brave and follow duty. Already, in the eyes of the scouts, Dick and Tom were men, full grown and invincible.

And so for the time we will leave them. Holidays were drawing to a close, and very soon Tom was back at Eton. It was not till some weeks had elapsed that the scouts heard more exciting news of him.

CHAPTER XI

A Meeting of Conspirators

IN a low-ceilinged room situated at the back of a small house which abuts on the main street of Eton a tall man was seated one afternoon, his elbows on the woodwork of the window, his chin in his hands, and his eyes staring through the window at the passers in the High Street. There was a certain furtiveness about this individual, something which made it appear as if he did not wish to encounter observation. For he pulled the muslin curtain somewhat closer, and withdrawing his chair a little, placed the back nearest the window and seated himself astride it in such a position that, while he could look out into the street himself, no one glancing casually in that direction was likely to observe him.

"You can't be too careful," he said aloud, using a drawl which was the reverse of attractive, while there was a distinct accent about the words. "There might be a noise here, or there might not be. And if there were, why, all the busybodies in the place would be trying to decide who was to do with it. Wall, a stranger in Eton ain't nothing, I should guess, seein' as it's a kind of show ground. Still, he might get noticed, and there would be somethin' to pay. That man's a sight of time coming."

Still looking through the window, and regarding each and every passer-by with a close if swift scrutiny,

he took a pocketbook from his coat, pulled off the elastic band which closed it, and hunted for something secreted in an inner part. At length he produced what was evidently a newspaper cutting, and smoothed it out in the palm of his left hand.

"R will meet A at the time and place advertised," he read. "Can give valuable information."

"Humph! Valuable information," remarked the man, reading the words again. "But that ain't all that's wanted. Valuable help is what I'm after too. Now what sort of a fellow will he be? An old 'un ain't much use. I'm after a young man who's game to do what he's told, and clear away without ever opening his mouth to anyone. Denny says that this fellow is the sort of one I'm waitin' for. So he may be; but it seems to me that I shall have to have some better hold over him than money'll give. Ah, there go some of the scholars! Swells they do look with their tall hats and black coats."

A number of Eton boys happened to be passing, so that for the moment this stranger put aside the short notice he had been reading and stared at the boys in a manner which showed more than usual interest.

"Lively crickets," he remarked. "Look keen and happy. Shouldn't care if I was a boy again with a fresh start before me. That's where the rub comes. A man of my age can't turn back; he's gone so far on his journey that it's too late. Besides, bad luck would be up against me again for sure; I seem to have been born for it."

Across his clean-shaven face there came for one brief instant something akin to a look of longing. The idea sped across his mind that if only he could have begun life as a boy again, but armed with the experience which years of hard life had given

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him, he would do very differently. Was there regret in his tones? Who can say? For this man's features were moulded very firmly. True, there was about the eyes a shifty look which would have made an observant person somewhat doubt his honesty, while the chin had a certain intangible air of indecision about it. Still, for all that, the face was not a bad one. The man had been good looking at one period of his life, and might still have been so, if one had known all about him. For John Anderson was his own enemy. He had been spoiled when a youngster, had looked askance at work, and finally had become what is known as a waster. The bad luck of which he had spoken was more imaginary than real, and what there was of it had too often been of his own bringing. But the very memory of his fancied ill-fortune coming at this moment chased away instantly the better thoughts, the instant's longing, which had come sweeping across his mind.

"Just rank bad luck dogging my steps since I was a youngster," he exclaimed, crumpling the paper in his fingers. "Instead of being one of those men for whom all turns to dollars, I've been short of money all my life. And then, when I thought I had it in the palms of both hands, I was cheated out of it, as one might say."

He sat on his chair musing for a while, and though he still stared out of the window his eyes did not perceive the passing people. Instead, he was reviewing past events in his life.

"Yes, cheated out of it," he added after a while, a fierce note to his words. "A fellow can't always see years in front of him, else it might have been worth my while to keep on good terms with Arthur; but I never guessed that he'd follow me out to Canada and make a fortune. I never even thought that the

Arthur Kidman I had left in England in a small way of business would strike it rich with his stores and leave a whole pot of money. Half-brothers aren't always good friends: I was a fool to quarrel with him."

He became silent for a while, thinking of those past days. Not that he was likely to have forgotten any point in his own or the family's history. This Anderson, for he it was, had had the matter on his mind for some years past. Thousands of times he had blamed himself that he had not taken pains to befriend his half-brother when he emigrated to Canada. And thousands of times also had he lamented the fact that on his half-brother's death there was a son who would come in for all his money. In those days Anderson had called on the firm of solicitors in Montreal, those whom the reader will remember had been left as trustees of Mr. Kidman's fortune, and there had been a violent scene. For he had attempted to force them to hand over some money. Then he had turned his attention to the boy.

"Imp!" he exclaimed as the memory of the lad crossed his mind. "And what a fool I was to weaken that time when I had him. Left him on the plains, thinking that no one would find him, and then, because I couldn't bear to think of the kid there all alone, left to die of exposure, went and kind of hinted that there was something to be found that would bring a reward."

There was a scowl on his features as he spoke, but, if one could read the eyes aright, there was relief behind them; for Anderson was not a villain by nature. He was a weak man for whom an easy life had every attraction. And, like others of the same character, he failed when the hour of trial came. That hour of trial had come when, longing for Arthur Kidman's

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fortune, and knowing that it descended direct to himself once Tom Kidman was out of the way, he had abstracted the lad when only a tiny child, had hurried him away from his guardians with murderous thoughts in his heart, and had then relented. He sighed now at the thought, though his failure did him credit, and proved him to be not such an utter villain as one would have suspected.

"And then the youngster disappeared," he said, his brows knitted. "I ferreted about throughout Canada and failed to find him. Then I came to England, and failed again. I went down to Slimington to learn what I could of the colonel who was an old friend of Arthur's, and when I found he had a nephew staying with him, named Tom Stapleton, I hadn't the sense to see that he wasn't a nephew, and that his real name was Kidman. But that's done with now; the difficulty's over. I can put my finger on the lad any day. The thing is, what to do with him, how to clear him away altogether?"

That set him thinking deeply again, while a troubled look came over his face. For the reader has gauged his own idea of this Anderson. He was a man who desired riches greatly, but who, in a country where gold is made, was too indolent to work for it. And now, to obtain it as a legacy, he must become something akin to a murderer. In fact, he must run the risk of the law, and perhaps find himself inside a prison.

It was the thought of the latter which troubled him. He had railed so often against his own timidity, when he first absconded with Tom, that he had cured himself of any leaning he may have had to mercy. Tom's life was nothing to him; the question uppermost in the mind of this rascal was how he could deprive Tom of that life without incurring danger himself.

"There are ways; I've been thinking them out," he said. "This man'll help me. From what Denny tells me he's desperate enough for anything."

For a little while he had removed his eyes from the window, and had carefully deposited the newspaper cutting in its receptacle again. And for that reason he did not perceive the individual who had come walking at a swift pace down the High Street. The man was somewhat short of stature, broad and strong, and, one would have said, some thirty or more years of age. An ugly cap was pressed low down on his head, and the peak made it difficult to observe the upper half of his features. The lower half was mainly composed of beard, for this individual sported a dark-coloured and somewhat ample appendage.

"Somewhere's hereabouts," he was saying to himself as he strode along.

"I'm not going to put my head into a noose if I knows it. I'll pass and have a good look, then come back again. Best be careful even in a place miles away from home, where there isn't a soul to know one."

His eyes fell on the little house in a room of which Anderson was waiting, and the stranger stepping along the street told himself it looked innocent enough. He passed on some little way, looked into a shop window, and then retraced his steps again.

"Yes, looks quiet and peaceful enough," he told himself. "Not the sort of house where cops would be lying: I'll try it."

But still he was cautious. He crossed to the far side of the street, looked into another shop window, and then ensconced himself at the entrance of a narrow doorway leading to a yard at the back of the houses. From that point of vantage he observed the house for some ten minutes, till Anderson, looking out again, perceived him, and became interested.

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"The man, I'm dead sure," he said. "Moderately tall and broad" Denny said, "but didn't know his age. He's been watching some minutes. I'll signal to him."

He rose from the chair, went close to the window, and, having extracted the newspaper cutting again, pulled the curtain aside a few inches and held the paper against the glass. The man opposite stretched his neck forward at once to see the better. Then he looked up and down the street, and, having persuaded himself that no one was looking in his direction, he darted across and tapped at the door which led at once into the room. Anderson flung it open, and shut and locked it as soon as his visitor had entered.

"I came in answer to the advertisement of A," began the stranger.

"Put in the papers by A. That's me—Andrews," said Anderson, giving a false name.

"Thank you; names don't matter. I'm R."

"Short for Raines, I think," said the one who had been watching. The effect of his words was magical. The newcomer darted back towards the door, his face livid. He stared at the man who had spoken last as if he were a wild beast, while one of his hands sought an inner pocket. His deep, startled breathing could be heard right across the room.

"What's that?" he demanded fiercely.

"Your name, I think," came the cool answer.

"Come, Mr. Raines, there is nothing to be startled at. I happen to know who you are, that is all. The information is important to me, and I shall take care to keep it. Have no fears. I am not looking for any one of your name with any unfriendly purpose. On the contrary, I wish to act as your friend. I can show you that it will pay you to trust me."

"But—but how did you get it? Who told you? Besides, it's wrong; I'm Rankin, not Raines."

The one who had just entered blurted the words out rapidly, as if he were hardly able to control his speech and were still suffering from the start which the other man had undoubtedly given him. But his face bore witness to the fact that he was romancing. Anderson was not the one to be taken in by such an obvious falsehood.

"Rankin? Why, certainly," he said in soothing tones, which were a little cynical. "By all means let it be Rankin. A cigarette, Mr. Rain—er—Mr. Rankin. Sit down, do. We'll talk."

He put a chair in position for his guest, and offered him refreshment from a bottle standing on a table. Then he watched as the man drank, scrutinizing his features closely, endeavouring to read what manner of individual he was. As for the newcomer, not even his own mother would have taken him for Raines, the hooligan of Slimington village, whom Tom had beaten so handsomely on that memorable occasion. This man appeared at first sight to be at least ten years older. But the impression gradually came to one that there was something familiar about the sallow features. To begin with, Raines was possessed of small, slitlike eyes, placed remarkably close together; this individual had precisely that characteristic. Then Raines's face was always somewhat bucolic. His cheeks were a prominent portion of his features; and here also the stranger resembled him, his beard clinging tightly. But there was something further. When the man removed his cap he was careless enough to disarrange the hair at the point where the whisker commenced. And there a hard line was visible.

"A false beard, of course," chuckled Anderson, "just as apparent as his false name. My friend, Mr. Rain—er—pardon, Mr. Rankin, may I suggest that you inspect yourself in that glass. With me, of

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course, as I have explained, there is no danger, not the slightest; but—ahem—outside there might be. The police, for instance, are searching for a man who was clean shaven, a man, curiously enough, called Raines, wanted for an attack on a post cart."

He lit a cigarette, pointed to a small mirror over the fireplace, and nonchalantly replaced the case. By then Raines—for he it was without a shadow of doubt—was livid. Never very brilliant, he was vastly troubled to discover who this man was who had enticed him to this house, and for what purpose. The haunting fear that he was a detective suddenly became a certainty, and the very horror of it chained him to his chair. His nervous fingers unconsciously toyed with the cigarette he had just taken, while his eyes were glued to Anderson's face. Then the colour which had swelled in his face suddenly fled away, leaving him sallow and pallid. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead, his limbs shook, and for the space of a full minute he was as helpless as a baby.

"Evidently afraid of his own shadow," thought Anderson, chuckling to himself. "Not a very old criminal, and therefore somewhat upset at the sight of a policeman, or any mention of the law. George! Why shouldn't I? Here's the very man I have been looking for."

His brow furrowed, an ugly look came over his face, while the eyes took on a cruel stare. Some piece of mischief was evidently being hatched in the rascal's brain, and he paused a while to give his wits the fullest opportunity.

"Why not? Why not?" he asked himself, over and over again, still staring at the man cowering before him. "I could drive him with a threat. I can hold this matter over his head and make him my servant. I can stand aside and see him commit a——no, no, we

will not call it names. But I can make him do my bidding without fearing for myself. Gee! This is a find!"

There was little doubt of what the ruffian had been thinking. Here was a man longing to bring about a certain piece of rascality, to wit, the robbing Tom Stapleton of his life, in order that another might come into the fortune which would be our young hero's if he attained to twenty-one years of age. That man had already made one attempt and failed, partly because in those days he had some gentle thoughts about him, some whisperings of conscience, as also a keen aversion of encountering the inside of a prison. But now time and disappointed longing had changed him. This Anderson desired nothing more than Tom's death, but still his fears of a prison and worse remained as keen as ever. Why not compel this man Raines, already deeply implicated, and wanted by the police, to do the treacherous deed for him? Why not make use of the knowledge of his participation in a grave crime to compel him to commit another, yes, compel him instead of having to beat about the bush and persuade him? Ah, if only the rascal Anderson had known at that instant that there was more still to aid him, that the wretch cowering there in the chair, staring across at him with glazed eyes, had himself also a reason for wishing Tom the worst of fortune! If only he could have guessed that Raines had been thoroughly thrashed by our hero, and had sworn to take vengeance on him for that fact alone; and that now there was more placed in the scale against Tom Stapleton. For had he not tracked Raines and his comrade Franklin, and almost caused the arrest of the former? Yes, in those two vital facts alone there was sufficient to egg Raines on to any further act of rascality.

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But by now the wretch seated in the chair had regained a little equanimity. He braced his muscles for an effort, and, with the memory that he had once before escaped arrest, he resolved to make another struggle on this occasion.

"Who are you?" he asked fiercely.

"You've dropped your cigarette. Another," came the suave answer, as Anderson held out his case.

"If—if you're a detective, don't you think to take me so easily. I'll shoot you."

Quick as a flash Raines's hand went to that inner pocket, and in a moment he held a shining revolver pointed at his host's head. But it was a very unsteady hand which held the weapon. As for Anderson, though a little taken aback by the unforeseen incident, his strength of character helped in this dilemma. He struck a match, relit his own cigarette, and offered the light to his visitor, an affable smile on his face.

"I'm glad to see that you are a man of action, Mr. Rankin," he said. "That's the sort of individual I have been seeking. Am I a detective? Ha, ha, ha! That is too delicious. My friend, I am just as anxious to keep out of the sight of such an officer as you are. Have I not said that I am your friend, that it will pay you to listen to me? Come, put the toy away; it spoils the enjoyment of my cigarette."

He threw himself back in his chair, puffed at his cigarette, and smiled easily between the puffs; but he watched his visitor all the while like a cat.

"Dangerous beggar," he thought. "He's so scared that he might blaze off without being able to help it. Come," he went on, "take a sip from that glass, Mr. Rain—Mr. Rankin, and let us chat. I assure you that you have nothing but gain to make out of me."

His coolness more than his words assured the ruffian

opposite. Raines replaced the weapon, gulped at the contents of his glass, and lit his cigarette with trembling hand. Across his narrow forehead there was drawn a deep furrow.

"Well?" he asked. "How did you get to know of me? Why did you put that advertisement in the paper? What do you want?"

"I will take the questions in that order. How did I get to know of you? That was simple: Denny is a friend of mine."

"The receiver! The biggest robber that ever breathed," gasped Raines in his astonishment.

Anderson nodded. "A rascal, I know, but useful, very, to those who have things to dispose of, Mr. Rain—er, how stupid of me!—Mr. Rankin, is it not? things to dispose of which—er—require clever handling. Jewels and such like articles, bank notes for instance, such as one might receive through the post."

Raines winced; any mention of the post distressed him. He had the subconscious feeling that this man knew everything about him.

"Well?" he demanded again. "Denny's a thief. His friends are thieves also."

Anderson pooh-poohed the remark with a wave of the hand. "He is a useful man, and has helped me often," he said. "Now listen. I was seeking for help from anyone who happened to know the neighbourhood and inhabitants of a village called Slimington."

At the mention of the place Raines sprang to his feet, and once more his hand went to his weapon. His face became a dull, livid colour, and in a flash all his old fears were roused. An oath escaped him. He kept his eyes rigidly on the other man and slowly backed towards the door.

"Let me get out of this," he gasped, scowling fiercely. "I'll—I'll kill you."

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"Why, certainly, if you wish it," came the easy answer, as Anderson still puffed at his weed. "But let us consider for a moment. I have money to offer, and, as you have said, Denny is a mean thief. No doubt the funds with which he was able to provide you are none too plentiful. If you go now, you lose an opportunity of filling your pockets. But as to danger from me, you really are too absurd. I have said that I have nothing to do with the law; I am not a detective, nor a policeman."

He rose slowly from his chair, walked to the door and unlocked it. Then he stepped to the window, turning his back on Raines.

"There is no one about," he said. "It has begun to rain hard, so that now is an excellent opportunity. Go, if you are a fool and cannot trust me. Stay, if you wish to earn a handsome reward."

Raines hesitated. It was true enough that, in spite of his desperate attack on the post cart, the funds he had been able to secure after the robbery were very slender. In a little while all his ill-gained coins would have gone, and then a blankness rose up before him. Besides, the very fact that this man had opened the door and given him free permission to leave reassured him wonderfully. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, softly closed the door again, and, sitting down, took a deep gulp from his tumbler.

"What is it?" he asked abruptly, taking a bolder tone. "I know Slimington. What of it?"

Anderson smiled before he turned. There was a look of triumph about his eyes. "Come," he said, seating himself, "that is sensible. Slimington is possessed of an inhabitant of the name of Colonel Bland. A nephew lives with him, a lad."

Raines scowled. "Tom Stapleton," he growled. "Don't I know him, just!"

"Indeed!" came the suave answer.

"We had a row; he licked me. I swore I'd kill him some day. Then there was that matter with the post cart——" Raines came to a sudden stop. It flashed across his mind that in his anger at the memory of our hero he was telling all to a stranger. "A friend of mine was mixed up in it," he said hastily. "This imp, with some of the other boy scouts, tracked him. They put the police on, and——"

"And you—er, I mean he, barely escaped. I read it," nodded Anderson. "Franklin was killed, Raines escaped. The police have lost all trace of him. Strange that I should have called you Mr. Raines."

There was a significant note about his answer, a cynicism about the words which half-cowed and half-angered Raines. He stared at the man, and then, taking his courage in both hands, blurted out his story. He admitted that he was actually Raines, that he had robbed the post cart, and that he it was for whom the police were searching.

"What then?" he demanded. "I don't bear the Colonel no grudge; but his nephew, I'll kill him when I'm able."

Anderson whistled. To hide his delight he had to rise and walk to the window. He felt extraordinarily elated, and congratulated himself that at length fortune was smiling upon him. Then he turned swiftly, crossed to Raines, and shook his hand vigorously.

"Strange," he said hoarsely. "The queerest thing I've heard tell of. Here are you wanting to get even with a young cub, while a—er—friend of mine would do anything to see the last of the young rascal. I—er—this friend will pay a handsome sum to the man who helps him. When Tom Stapleton, as he's called, though his right name is Kidman, is put under, the man who has managed the work will have gold to

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chink in his pocket. Why shouldn't you pay him back for what he's done? If you'd been caught in that stable—well, my friend, we must remember that the postman was killed. That sounds very much like—er—murder."

Raines shivered. He wished that this stranger would not so constantly refer to the matter. He knew well enough that the unfortunate postman was dead, without having the fact drummed into his ears. But if the mention of it made him shiver, it reduced him also to a condition of desperation. At one attempt he had become an out-and-out criminal. Nothing that he could do now would be worse. The penalty he incurred could hardly be increased. Besides, it was Tom Stapleton this man's friend wished to be rid of, and that youth was a veritable red rag to this villain.

"George," he exclaimed, "he's here, at the school!"

"Precisely."

Raines rose swiftly and went to the window. Then his finger shot out, while he crouched below the curtain.

"There! Look at him—Tom Stapleton!"

The rascal Anderson joined him at once, and together they looked into the street. Two Eton boys were sauntering past, Tom Stapleton and a comrade. Raines at once pointed to our hero.

"That's him! The viper!" he hissed. "I'll kill him!"

Anderson regarded his nephew with close attention. Ruffian that he was, he could not help but admire the pose of the lad before him. For though Tom was but sauntering, his hands deep in his pockets, as is the custom, his tall hat tilted slightly backwards, yet he gave one unmistakably the impression of strength. The lad looked as jolly as a cricket, but with it all a trifle thoughtful and serious. Good-looking too, without cause for question, and a gentleman in appear-

ance from the top of his untidy hat to the soles of his strong walking boots.

"He licked you?" asked Anderson incredulously, thereby skilfully heaping coals of fire on Raines's fury.

"I'll kill him," came the low answer. "He nigh did for me this last time. I'll finish him, even if it weren't for money. Let's talk it over. How much for the job? How's it to be done? Tell me."

That night, when the two left the little room, their plans were fully arranged, for Anderson was a schemer. Whatever happened, he told himself that it was urgent that he himself must not appear in the matter. If the boy was killed, he would take ship back to Canada promptly, and there pretend to have learned of his sudden accession to good fortune. He crept from the house, took the train to London, and disappeared. Raines stayed the night, and thereafter took up his quarters in a hovel outside Eton. But he was not idle; he watched Tom like a cat; and one fine day, when he had seen our hero put off in a skiff with his friend, the ruffian made preparations to carry out his wicked purpose. Returning to his room, he dressed himself most carefully in flannels, and made sure that his beard was perfect. Then he returned to the landing stage, stepped aboard a petrol launch which he had hired some days before and used constantly, and set out on the water.

"This time there shall be no mistake," he told himself. "I'm a-goin' to do for young Tom Stapleton."

CHAPTER XII

Raines Appears Again

"You take the sculls, I'll steer her," said Tom that afternoon, when out for a paddle with his bosom friend of Eton, to wit, Jack Strakey.

"Seat yourself comfortably at first, so as to get the skiff trimmed. Now take a grip of the sculls, and pull gently. Don't dip 'em too deep, and look out for crabs. They're bad things to catch in a boat so light as this is."

Tom was an ardent wet bob. He loved the river more even than the stretch of green between the wickets, though he was no mean exponent of the game of cricket. Indeed he was coming on as a batsman, while he could already send along a decent ball. Keeping the wicket, however, had a huge attraction for him.

"If he sticks to it he'll play at Lords one of these days," said the Captain, who had been watching the smart manner in which he took the balls behind the wicket. "Keep your eye on that young chap, Clarkson; he's worth watching."

But a lad cannot be in two places at once, and there was some reason to believe that the river might claim him in competition with a cricket pitch. But, for the time being, seeing that he was not yet quite of the correct age, nor sufficiently skilled to win a place in

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the eleven, there was no reason why he should not devote the greater part of his time to the river. Tom gloried in it. His hours of leisure found him invariably in a skiff, and those hours of leisure speedily became moments packed full of strenuous exertion. For Tom was the boy for movement.

"Never sits still, never walks if he can run—hurries everything, even his work," grumbled his housemaster. "That's what I have to try and correct. Plenty of energy is one thing, when applied in the right place. On the river, for instance, it's excellent. In form, too, it is to be highly commended; but there one wants it of a different order. A lad doesn't learn overmuch nor commit things to memory who goes too slap-dash at it."

It was Tom's character thoroughly. He went at things with a dash, just as he had fought with Raines, with a dash tempered with no small spice of coolness. And here he was, taking his ease as an exception, which merely went to prove the fact we have mentioned. He was giving his chum some instruction. And presently, when Jack had grasped the idea of sculling, and there seemed no longer any fear of his upsetting the craft, Tom leaned back in the stern, the rudder lines idly held in his hand, and steered the boat up river.

Puff! puff! puff! Behind him he heard a petrol motor exhausting.

"Beasts!" he exclaimed sharply. "Don't like 'em on the river. Water is meant for three purposes. Bathing is nearly first, because it's so ripping. Drinking's another, because, you see, it's necessary: a chap wouldn't be able to live without a mug of water on occasion."

"And?" asked Jack, a smile on his face at Tom's soliloquizing.

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"And, lastly, though it's easily first, water's meant for a boat to be rowed in. Rivers weren't made for petrol launches."

"But petrol launches for rivers," laughed his comrade. "I rather fancy 'em; they're so quick. You can scoop along at a rattling pace. When I'm older I'll have a racer, see if I don't. Hadn't we better steer over towards the bank?"

"And give him the whole river!" exclaimed Tom, casting a look of disgust over his shoulder. For, like all ardent wet bobs, he had a dislike of the power-driven launch, fancying it spoiled the river, and, as is the custom with youth, failing to consider that there are many whose sculling days are past, and who may still like a ramble on the water. "Beasts!" he exclaimed again. "I hate 'em. Give him more room! Why, he's got heaps as it is. Let him give way a little. Burr! Listen to his whistle. Spoils the quietness of the river."

He lolled back in the skiff, the puff of the oncoming exhaust beating in his ears, while the skiff, propelled by Jack, slowly made her way up the centre of the stream of water.

"Don't you get fidgety," said Tom, seeing Jack glancing again at the launch. "There's no chance of our being upset, unless, of course, there's a muff on board. Those things can steer to an inch. It's rather jolly, too, to get into her wash and do a little bit of bobbing. Burr! Listen to the thing. Imagines he's on a motor clearing the road."

It was amusing to see the disgust written on his face. Tom was a true wet bob, and his remarks were consistent with his leanings. As for the launch, she was coming along at three-quarter speed, and the man aboard her made no secret of his coming. He blew his whistle shrilly, so that all might see that

he had observed the skiff in front, and had sent a warning.

"You see," thought Raines, as he controlled the wheel, and fixed his eyes on our hero and his companion, "if I was to run into them without so much as a sound there would be tremendous trouble. People would say I did it on purpose. As it is, I've blown for them, and now they must take their chances."

He leaned over the engine and opened the throttle little by little. Puff, puff, puff! The exhaust increased in rapidity.

"Going quicker," observed Tom. "So much the better. Be past us and out of sight all the sooner. Stinking things! Besides, the wash'll be bigger. We'll roll and pitch beautifully."

"Again," said Raines to himself, this time jerking his throttle wide open and nctching his ignition quadrant to its fullest extent. "That'll take her clear over them. Shouldn't wonder if they went down never to be seen again. I'll have to be slippy. No waiting for enquiries for me. No coroner's courts to attend if I know it. Not much; the police are so knowing."

Bizz! Burr! He set the whistle off again, for he was now within a hundred yards of the skiff.

"You don't think we'd better give him a little more room?" asked Jack, not liking the speed of the oncoming launch, which he, of course, could see without an effort. "Ain't she likely to swamp us?"

"Rats!" exclaimed Tom. "Pull along; we're hardly moving."

"But—Tom, she's coming along so that she'll only just miss us!" cried Jack, ceasing to row. "Hi!" he shouted. "Steer over; you'll swamp us!"

That brought Tom to his knees. He screwed round on the narrow seat and stared behind him. The exhaust was now beating very rapidly, while there was a white

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line of wash in front of the launch's cutwater. As for the steersman, our hero only caught a glimpse of him, for he crouched over his wheel and held his head down as low as possible.

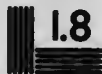
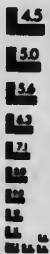
"Make 'em think I didn't see 'em," thought Raines. "If I'm bound to come forward afterwards I can swear that I sounded the whistle and that I had a clear course. The accident must have happened because they were fools enough to pull over."

"Steady there! You'll be into us; put her over!" shouted Tom, seeing that a collision was imminent. He shouted at the top of his voice and raised himself a little higher. At the same moment he pulled the tiller rope, hoping that what little way the boat had on her would carry her to one side. But the man aboard the launch seemed to have lost his wits. He stood up suddenly and waved his arms. Then, instead of swinging his wheel over, so as to make the launch shoot away to the right, he actually manœuvred it so that her cutwater headed direct for the skiff, and, more than that, the launch followed precisely the course which Tom's twisting of the rudder had produced. A collision was a foregone conclusion. It was absolutely certain. But here there was no use in stretching out a hand to ward off the oncoming boat. She was travelling at a great speed, with weight behind her, and the thrust of a strong, power-driven propeller. Tom had no time to shout again, for the launch was on him. The bow struck the skiff full astern, doing credit to the aim of the ruffian aboard her. And the result was as one might have expected. There was the sound of breaking timber; the frail stern crumpled as if it were made of eggshell. It rose to the blow, doubled up like a concertina, and then sank beneath the water. All had happened almost in the moment of the collision. What followed took but a bare second. The keel of the launch



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Tom Stapleton

rose up on the skiff, surged along her full length, and drove her beneath the river. As for the lads on board, Tom was swept aside by the gunwale and flung clear of the wreckage; but Jack was not so fortunate. He was struggling to his feet when the bow caught him full in the chest, flung him on his back, and then rode up over him. He was pressed beneath the water by the keel, and a second later received a terrific blow from one blade of the propeller. A patch of watery red floated to the surface, and when Tom looked for his friend that was all that was visible.

"Smashed," he thought. "Run into and crumpled up, and by the biggest muff that ever handled a launch. Where's Jack?"

His eye caught sight of the patch of watery red, and the colour caused his heart to beat and palpitate. A hand rose to the surface some five yards down stream, and then sank promptly. Tom did not wait for more. He was always at home in the water, and this immersion was nothing to him, as it should not be to any other healthy boy of his age. But accidents will happen: even the best swimmer is handicapped if he be struck by a propeller. Jack was helpless; Tom instantly struck out to rescue him. He dived, kicking his legs in the air, and swam under the surface, feeling about in all directions. But there was no reward for his efforts. His fingers had come in contact with nothing. He rose, feeling as if he were on the point of exploding, trod water for a moment, and then went below again like a porpoise; for a glimpse had been afforded him of a shock head of hair more than half-submerged. It was Jack's, and Tom struck towards it strongly. Ah, his fingers gripped a shirt! He hauled on it, while kicking with all his might. His head burst through to the surface. He pulled once more on the shirt, saw the same shock head of hair,

and gripped it with the other hand. In a trice he had Jack's head on his shoulder, noticing, as he brought it there, that there was an ugly cut across it.

"Puffed," he thought. "Better take it easy. We're in midstream; they'll take a little time to reach us."

He lay flat on his back, his hands now beneath Jack's arms, and the latter's head reclining on his chest. It was not so easy to keep above the surface, considering the weight he supported and that he was dressed in flannels. But a kick every now and again kept him afloat, so that he felt secure for the moment.

Meanwhile there was a commotion on the banks of the river. It happened that at the time of the accident there were very few people about, so that it was a signalman from the adjacent railway going home who observed what had happened. Pitching his basket aside, he came shouting towards the river. Then a boatman detected the reason, and promptly put off in a skiff, his assistant with him. He could see an object in the water, and realized that the stream was bearing it swiftly down towards him.

"Take her out into the centre and hold her there," he commanded. "Be ready to make a stroke to either side. Hi, there, send out a punt. This thing'll never bring us all home."

It was not a time for hesitation. Even that gallant signalman made sure of that. He was not the man to stand still and shout when active effort was wanted. He reached the bank, and straightway leaped into the river. Then with a few powerful strokes he gained the centre and came puffing beside our hero.

"Got him?" he panted. "Let's lend a hand."

Tom accepted the proposal readily, for Jack lay a deadweight in his arms, and the struggle he had already made had somewhat exhausted him.

"Right," he managed to answer. "Help me hold

him up. Best not swim. We'll all float down together."

The signalman willingly took one of the unconscious boy's arms and then lay on his back, kicking gently. It was in this manner that they came sweeping down on the stream, Jack's head all the while clear of the water. In three minutes they were close to the waterman, and in less than that time aboard the punt.

"Send for a doctor," shouted the boatman as he directed the punt to the landing stage. "One of you men get a lot of those boat cushions piled in the office. Don't stand there looking with your mouths open. Get to the telephone one of you."

He was a man of decision, and had seen at once that skilled aid would be required. And those ashore in his employ, however curious they were and however anxious to see the two lads safely landed, ran off at once to do his bidding. A minute later willing hands were carrying Jack into the office, Tom following closely.

"He's had a nasty knock on the head, from the propeller I fancy," he gasped. "And in addition he's half-drowned. We shall want to practise artificial respiration. Know it?"

The waterman nodded. Was it likely that he, living all his life so close to the river, where immersions are not so infrequent, would be ignorant of such a necessary first-aid operation? But, if he had been wanting in the necessary information, Tom knew it. Every scout worth his salt has learned the movements, knows the reason for them, and can be safely trusted to carry out the operation—not in a flurry, and at such a pace that a half-drowned man would be rapidly killed, but at a reasonable rate, that is, not too fast and not too slow, observing the patient's face all the while.

Here however, there was no need for Tom to exert himself—a matter for congratulation—for our hero was

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not a little exhausted. The boatman placed Jack on the heap of cushions, and then, selecting a long one, removed him to that. Another shorter one, firmly rolled, was placed beneath his shoulders, and thereafter the operation of inducing respiration in the apparently lifeless body was persevered in slowly and with method.

"One of you men run in and see that the bath is filled with good hot water," said the boatman after a while. "He's coming round a little. I rather suspect that he's more stunned than drowned, and certainly he's beginning to breathe nicely. If the doctor advises it we'll put him in the bath, give him a cup of hot stuff, and then wrap him in warmed blankets, and carry him round to the house. Any of you chaps see the accident?"

No one had done so, for the collision had occurred some distance upstream, at a time when the men were busy in the boathouses. The commotion on the bank had brought them running out.

"But I heard a motor whistle," announced one. "It screeched three or four times. Perhaps it was that that sunk 'em."

Tom nodded. He had got his breath by now and was shivering in a corner while he anxiously awaited his chum's revival. "Chap was an utter muff," he said. "Lost his head and ran us down."

"Seemed to me that he did it of purpose," exclaimed the signalman very emphatically. "I was watching him. He set his engine going hard a hundred yards from you, and when you shouted and sheered off, he followed dead on to you. It warn't muffin'; that ere chap was out to sink someone."

"Then he'll jest have to explain all about it," cried the boatman. "The police will make an enquiry, and of course he'll have to appear. Whereabouts is he?"

Come back to the stage, has he? or put in farther up and come back afoot?"

But when they came to search for the man who had brought about this seeming accident there was not a sign of him, nor of the launch.

"The fellow went racing up the river as soon as he had run into the skiff," announced a boy who had been seated on the bank some three hundred yards above where the collision had taken place. "I shouted to him, but he didn't seem to hear. He jerked at something above the engine, and after that she seemed to go faster. I shouted again, but he took no notice."

"That's queer. Reckon we do get hooligans on the river every now and again," said the boatman, looking serious. "But I ain't got time to go into it now. The police'll take it up. Has one of you chaps telephoned for 'em?"

"Ten minutes back," came the reassuring answer.

"Then we can let it rest; looks to me as if the man was a madman."

About an hour later Jack was fully conscious, and was beginning to feel wonderfully sleepy and comfortable. His head was enveloped in bandages, while he himself was wrapped in heavy blankets. He was just as warm as a toast, and had the greatest difficulty in keeping his eyes open.

"Put him in my car; I'll take him back to the house," said the doctor. "It is a closed car, so there's no fear of his getting a chill. Come along, Stapleton."

Tom was one of those lads who are naturally courteous. The Colonel had taken abundance of pains with his training, and consideration for the feelings of others was part of the curriculum. Therefore our hero did not forget those who had helped him. He shook hands warmly with the signalman and with the boat-

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men, thanked them heartily, and then dived into the motor.

"Plucky young beggar," said the signalman. "Don't believe he half-liked my coming at the very first; but he was glad to have me before we were landed. He stuck true to his chum."

"You saved my life," cried Jack that evening, after a sound sleep, when Tom went in to see him. "I owe you a heap: shake hands on it."

"You'd have done the same for me, so let's have no more jaw about it," came the answer. "Hungry?"

"You bet. But I'm serious; if it hadn't been for you——"

"Shut up!" cried Tom abruptly. "What'll you have?"

"Anything that's going. "But, look here——"

"Look here yourself, Jack," said Tom promptly.

"If you say another word about the matter I'll report you as too sleepy for food. Then you'll have to starve till to-morrow."

That brought his chum to reason. He sat up in bed, looking quite interesting with the bandage on his head, and laughed as he felt it.

"What about that muff who ran into us?" he asked.

"Heard anything more about him? Suppose he was some donkey out for a trial spin on a thing he'd never handled before?"

Tom did not answer for the moment; he too was wondering.

"The police are rarely bothered," he said. "The launch was found a mile higher up the stream, with her nose run deep into the mudbank. Her engine was still running, but there wasn't a soul aboard her."

"Collided with the bank, the muff. Jerked overboard. Drowned, perhaps," ventured Jack between

the mouthfuls of arrowroot which, to his disgust, was alone allowed him.

"That's what the police thought at first; but they made enquiries. The launch had been hired on several occasions by a man wearing a beard. He wasn't a muff. He had learned thoroughly how to control it. There was no trace of him where the launch was stranded, but a man of similar appearance took a ticket for London and travelled up within an hour of the collision."

"Phew! Scared of the consequences; couldn't face the music."

"Maybe," agreed Tom. "It's a curious incident. Seemed as if he'd made up his mind to drown us."

That was the suspicion left for days after, and Tom never managed to free himself of it. It was increased tenfold some days later when the Colonel arrived and made certain statements to him. He told him of his birth, his father's death, of his uncle, and the attempt which had been made to kidnap him.

"That's not all," he said. "The police have information that a bearded man, similar to this fellow aboard the launch, was living in a hovel of a cottage outside Eton, and for days together was watching your schoolfellows. He had hired the motor boat, and gone out on several occasions. Then, one day, he came in a hurry, put off, and that was the last seen of him. Who's to say that it was not this rascally fellow Anderson, your father's half-brother?"

Who indeed! In the bewilderment of learning of his own origin Tom could hardly consider this new proposition. It was queer to feel that he was of such value that someone might attempt to steal him. As to suspecting that Raines had a finger in the pie, or had actually manned the launch, it never crossed the horizon of his mind for an instant. If it had, he would

have laughed at the idea immensely, it was so truly imaginary. But, in any case, he had had a warning. He vowed he would be careful in the future.

Three weeks later he was on his way home for the holidays, and stretched his head out of the train as he approached the junction nearest to Slimington, where his uncle was to meet him. He was filled with good spirits, for the term had been particularly enjoyable, while his mind was set on an excellent vacation.

"We'll show 'em what the boy scouts can do in the way of camping and tracking," he had said to himself. "There's heaps to be done in Slimington."

"Halloo! No uncle. Where is he?" he wondered as he stepped on to the platform.

"Pardon, are you Mr. Tom Stapleton?" asked a stranger coming forward. The man was dressed as a chauffeur, and from a certain untidiness about him one gathered the fact that he was a mechanic employed at some local garage, to whom the task fell at times of driving private individuals.

Tom nodded. "Yes," he said. "Uncle's not ill, I hope."

"Why, the Colonel, sir; no sir," smiled the man. "Nothing wrong with him so far as I knows; but his car's broke down. We got a wire telling us to meet this train, and ask for you. We're to take you along to Slimington. Have you any baggage?"

So that explained the matter. Tom heaved a sigh of relief at the information that there was nothing more serious, pointed out his baggage, and followed the man outside. There was a big car there, looking somewhat bedraggled. But what did that concern Tom? He stepped into it and drove off in the direction of Slimington. . . . But late that night he had failed to put in an appearance at the Colonel's, and when the morrow dawned there was not the smallest trace of

Tom Stapleton

him. Tom Stapleton had disappeared as entirely and absolutely as he would have done had he sunk beneath the river at Eton. All that the Colonel could ascertain was that a strange car, which the railway people had never seen before, and driven by a stranger, had called at the junction to fetch Mr. Tom. They had heard the man say that the Colonel's car had broken down, and that he had had telegraphic instructions to come there.

"While my private garage was broken open the previous night, and the car put hopelessly out of action," said the Colonel to the police. "This is very serious."

It was more than serious; it set half of England talking. It caused the boy scouts of Slimington to rise up in their fury. For Tom was gone—the most popular scout of all, and one of the smartest, seemed to have suddenly dropped out of existence.

CHAPTER XIII

The Sign of the Fox Patrol

ON the afternoon of the day following that on which Tom Stapleton disappeared a group of people were collected outside the large private garage which Colonel Bland had had erected at the back of his house.

The Colonel himself was there, and with him Scoutmaster James, while the police sergeant, Patrol Leader Kinchin, Dick Brown, and Billy made up the party. All their faces wore a serious expression.

"That's the report, sir," the Sergeant was saying. "We've wired in every direction; our constables have searched every road, and have made enquiries in every garage in the country. Barring the information I have been able to give you already there is not a word. We are beaten for the moment."

"So that we are very little farther ahead than we were this morning," answered the Colonel, who was looking decidedly harassed. "A porter happened to notice the direction in which the car drove off with Tom, while a carrier brought in a complaint to Uffington that a large car, precisely the colour of the one for which we are searching, raced past him furiously fifteen miles west of Uffington, failed to stop when he signalled on account of his horse, and drove straight on, still at a furious pace, although the occupants must have seen that his horse had got out of hand, and had pulled the cart into a ditch, where it was overturned. There all information ceases."

Tom Stapleton

He looked blankly at the officer and then at Mr. James. His brow was deeply furrowed, his eyes half-closed, while his features generally wore an air of great anxiety. And no wonder, considering all that had happened.

"It is desperately serious, this kidnapping of my ward," he told himself over and over again. "For it is clear that the villain, or villains, engaged in the work will stop at nothing. I was inclined to view that affair on the river at Eton as a pure accident, brought about by a careless rascal, and that was my view in spite of what the police told us. But it is evident that the same rascals made that their first attempt, and a very desperate one it was too. Now they have the boy absolutely at their mercy. They may have thrown him down a chalk pit, or tossed him into the sea."

He looked appealingly at Scoutmaster James, while the latter had his eye fixed on the constable. He was fidgeting from one foot to the other, and evidently on the point of speaking.

"And so we are no farther advanced," he said at last, catching the Colonel's eye.

"Not one inch farther. The boy is gone; there is not a trace of him. After the car swished past that carter every atom of news respecting it has vanished. Strict search and enquiry by the police in that quarter has failed to discover a single item on which we can work."

He kicked the ground irritably, and Scoutmaster James saw him bite nervously at his lip. He knew the Colonel very well, but in all his experience he had never known him so perturbed as on this occasion.

"There being no information to act on," he commenced slowly, as if he were feeling the ground before him, "it seems to me that we are not benefiting our-

selves by remaining idle here. The police have used great energy and discretion. They have failed; but it may be that a search along the road which we know the miscreants followed might produce something which the officers in that direction failed to observe. I do not desire, of course, to impeach the smartness of the force, but the best of men are not infallible. Something might have been overlooked."

"Something! What?" demanded the Colonel instantly, his face lighting up a little.

"That I cannot even venture to suggest," came the answer, as Mr. James shrugged his shoulders. "There might be a sign, some sort of spoor left by the car which a trained scout might follow, spoor which a policeman might well be expected to overlook, seeing that scouting does not enter into his curriculum."

"And you suggest that we might find it?" asked the Colonel eagerly. "That you and I following on my car might bring this spoor to light?"

"I suggest nothing. I say that if there is a spoor anywhere on the line of flight, I and these lads here will find it if anyone in England can do so. Otherwise what is the use of all our exercises? We are constantly training; deduction and keen observation are two of the arts most essential to a scout, and they are arts which we seek after constantly."

He looked across at the constable, a little uncertain as to how he would view this proposition. For it seemed almost as if the last speaker might be disparaging the sense and astuteness of the force. But he had no reason to be doubtful, for the Sergeant swung round upon him in an instant, his face serious yet smiling.

"It's just the very thing I wanted to propose myself, sir," he said. "A policeman can't do everything, and be everything. And it isn't as if we wanted to keep all

these matters to ourselves, like a dog with a tasty bone. Once before your scouts helped us. Helped us, did I say? Why, if it hadn't been for their scouting—the eyes for marks they seem to have—we should have been hopelessly lost in a search for those two who robbed the post cart. Now we don't get forrarder where we are. All we're doing is waiting to see if someone along the road will discover something which we have missed up to this. Seems to me it would be heaps better to go and look for it ourselves. Your scouts are just itching to lend a hand, and it ain't as if they were muffs. They know how to ferret out marks—spoor, as you call it—better than anyone I ever came across.”

“But supposing information is telegraphed here during our absence?” demanded the Colonel.

“You call in at the post offices, or, better still, at the police stations along the road. I have to stay in Slimington, but if there's a word about the boy I'll send it along over the telephone, and see that you get it.”

The Sergeant smacked his broad hands together as he spoke, as if to help in emphasizing his meaning. And it was clear at once that the suggestion found favour with the Colonel. His face brightened again, he looked over his shoulder, and straightway walked into the garage. A minute later he was piloting his car into the yard.

“We'll start in five minutes,” he said decisively. “I shall take a change of clothes, as we may be away overnight. Those who are coming had best arrange to do the same. If you run home now I will call for you when passing.”

He stopped the engine, stepped from the vehicle, and promptly went into the house. As for Scoutmaster James and the three members of the Fox Patrol of scouts, they took to their heels as if danger

were behind them. It was not so much that they anticipated the enjoyment of a motor trip, nor the excitement and interest of attempting to pick up spoor which might or might not exist; It was eagerness to elucidate a mystery which caused them more than ordinary anxiety. Their keenness was due entirely to their desire to help a comrade, to rescue him if possible from a scrape which the faces of their seniors told them plainly enough was of more than ordinary seriousness.

Ten minutes later the car was bounding along the road with all on board, and within half an hour of that she had reached Uffington.

"Where we have certain information that the car passed yesterday late in the afternoon," observed Mr. James. "Our first duty now is to watch for the spot where the carter's trap was upset into the ditch. That is absolutely the last clue we have to the whereabouts or the direction of these villains."

"We can push ahead for four miles in any case," said the Colonel, opening the throttle as soon as the outskirts of Uffington were passed. "For the carter made a statement as to his distance from the town at the time of the accident. At this pace we shall be there in a few minutes."

Indeed, very little time had elapsed before the car reached a spot where it became necessary to keep a sharp lookout, and, as it happened, within half a mile of it they came across the spoor for which they were searching. Scoutmaster James and the boys of the Fox Patrol promptly bundled out of the conveyance.

"Caution," called out the former. "This is where the accident happened, without a doubt, and beyond assuring ourselves of that fact we have no further interest with the carter and his trap. We must turn our attention to the road. Hum! not so easy: many carts, and cars too, it's more than likely, have come

this way since. Let us take care not to tread over the spoor and obliterate it."

The Colonel watched them from the driving seat, and though, considering all the difficulties in the matter, he had little faith that any tangible evidence could be obtained—for, as Scoutmaster James had said, the road was traversed by many vehicles—yet he could not help but admire the methodical manner in which this Fox Patrol set about the task before them. They took to the green side of the road, and halted when they reached the deep-scored rut where the carter's trap had left the macadam and run into the ditch.

"Plain as possible," said Scoutmaster James. "Can't say what the horse was actually doing. Probably he reared up, shied to one side, and pulled the cart right over into the ditch; but the wheel tells its own story. See here: it met the turf at this point, it ran along within six inches of the edge of the road for fifteen yards precisely—yes, fifteen yards," he repeated, carefully stepping the distance, and still taking the precaution of keeping to the turf.

"That shows the fellow was well on his own side of the road," observed Dick suddenly. "He was scared, and pulled over as far as possible. If he'd pulled still farther over he'd have driven into the ditch in which he ultimately landed. Say, that's a tyre track."

His finger shot out, and pointed to some marks imprinted in the thin film of mud which covered the road surface. "Lucky it ain't rained for three or four days: this stuff's thick and tenacious. If it were more watery those marks would soon be floated out by the fluid. Gee, ain't that track close to the trap!"

"To the mark left by the trap wheel," corrected Billy.

"Offside wheel of the trap, to be accurate and pre-

cise," drawled Kinchin, who was vastly interested. "There it is, Mr. James. The carter drove along on a farm trap with a breadth of five feet between wheel tracks. In spite of his pulling over, the car passed him within six inches. No wonder the fellow complained: it was a case of shaving."

"While this is a case of special tyres," observed Scoutmaster James, a smile suggestive of triumph on his features. "What do you boys make of them?"

For a little while there was silence amongst the boys, while all still carefully kept to the greensward lining the roadway. A puzzle had been presented to the scouts, and they were bent on unravelling it. More than that; already, at this stage of their search they had discovered something which no police officer had mentioned. The road unmistakably bore on its muddy surface spoor which might be of value.

"It just shows the wisdom of our coming," said Mr. James to the Colonel, as the latter stepped lightly beside him. "The task of following wheel tracks is not a difficult one for a scout trained to undertake it; but to the police it is somewhat different. Then, on this road there are so many, that even an astute officer may be forgiven if he failed to take much notice. You see, the tracks cross and recross one another, and if cattle have been on the road, they will be entirely obliterated in places. Such a quest wants the utmost time and attention; but what do you young fellows make of the tyre marks? Anything noticeable?"

"Off front a Dunlop grooved, practically new," said Dick without a moment's hesitation.

"Near front ditto," added Kinchin. "Not so new perhaps. Grooves don't mark so clearly.

"Off back tyre metal-studded, maker impossible to guess at," cried Billy, not to be outdone by his comrades. "Four rows of studs. Should say the tyre

had done a lot of running, as the two centre rows don't leave a deep impression. Besides that, there are quite a number missing. I could trace that tyre anywhere and swear to it."

The Colonel pricked up his ears; this sort of deduction from spoor left in the muddy surface of a road was entirely new to him. He had heard a great deal about it of late from Tom, but had hardly ever seen the art of tracking practised. "Swear to it?" he exclaimed, elevating his eyebrows, as much as to politely suggest that in his exuberant keenness Billy might be romancing. "How? Seems to me a very ordinary studded tyre must have left these impressions. You could swear to it, eh? Now that puzzles me intensely."

"It's easy, sir," answered Billy simply, though his face went to the colour of a beetroot. He stepped to the spot where the Colonel was closely scanning the marks in the road, having donned his pince-nez for that purpose, and bent over beside him. "First, it's a metal-studded tyre," he said, pointing with his finger.

"Yes, I see that plainly."

"Some of the two centre rows of studs have been shed in the course of running."

"Quite so, Billy. Here and there I can perceive the absence of impressions; but——"

"Some are gone from one of the two centre rows; some from the other. To swear to that tyre, supposing several were placed before me, I should closely examine the two centre rows of studs. Taking the inside of the two, for the sake of an example, I should put my finger on the spot where one was missing. I should count the studs from it till I came to another spot where one was missing, and so on round the tyre. Well, now, I've counted these impressions. I know that, taking the inner of those two rows of studs, there are ten

remaining between two gaps, then fourteen, then eight, then two studs altogether missing which lay next one another, then twenty-three studs, three missing, and another unbroken line of twelve before I come to the first I counted as missing. Add to that the fact that this is a four-inch tyre, by which a number of other sizes are ruled out of the question."

Billy began to look triumphant. The Colonel took his glasses from his eyes, rubbed them, and replaced them. Then he closely scrutinized the mark again.

"'Pon my word!" he exclaimed, and then, as a sudden thought struck him, he turned on Billy. "But," he said, "that tyre may lose other studs before you have the opportunity of seeing it: what then?"

But Billy was not confounded. He shook his head; he had had some experience of motoring. "Possible, quite, sir," he said gravely, "but not very likely. Studs pull out when new if the clutch of the car is fierce. If not, they wear down evenly along the two centre rows, the outer ones getting less wear altogether. They begin to drop out when they are worn right down, more than these are by a good deal, and when the cover itself is coming in contact with the road. From the fineness of the impressions I believe that tyre to have many weeks' life in it still. Please observe that the tyre was not hard pumped, else those two outer rows of studs would not have left their track so clearly. Also, to prove the latter, the car ran into this little hollow, and the wheels hit the ridge in advance with a squelch, which flattened it considerably. It's there, written as clear as possible."

The Colonel gasped. Yes, he could see it all clearly now that it was pointed out to him; but, otherwise, certainly not.

"Why," he cried in amazement, "I should have

been baffled by these other marks left in the mud. I'm not at all surprised that the police who came here failed to send us important information. Besides, there have been other cars along, with studded tyres."

"Two only," declared Scoutmaster James with emphasis, for all this while he had been diligently exploring the ground, taking care to keep away from wheel tracks. "Two only with metal-studded tyres, and those of smaller surface than the one which interests us. But we have a surer guide here than the impression Billy has been sharp enough to bring to your notice. What is this?"

They came clamouring about him, the Colonel looking wonderfully wise now that he had donned his pince-nez, Dick with a curious air of determination and suppressed excitement about him, and Billy and Kinchin with flushed faces aglow with keenness.

"Gee! That'll be better than all," agreed Dick, looking over the Scoutmaster's shoulder. "Better than everything. Near-side driving wheel was shod with a plain-treaded tyre, which was almost deflated. The fellow was in such a hurry that he couldn't stop to use his pump. We can follow that all day long. It's as clear as a pikestaff."

"Then the order is——?" asked the Colonel.

"Forward," said Scoutmaster James abruptly. "Forward, halting at times to investigate and make sure that the tracks are before us."

They bundled into the car in haste, and the vehicle quickly shot away from the spot where this important discovery had been made; for that it was important there could not be a doubt. In the Scoutmaster's notebook there were sufficient data, extracted from a seemingly uninteresting and muddy road, to allow of their continuing the pursuit of the rascal or rascals who had abstracted Tom, sufficient to allow the scouts

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to identify the car with assurance. It was therefore with better hope in their breasts that they sped forward. Nor did they have to halt till some thirty miles had been covered. Then, on descending to investigate, Dick declared that he perceived some difference in the spoor they had been following.

"Near-side tyre no longer flat," he reported. "No studded tyre on the off wheel, but a new grooved Dunlop."

That brought the Scoutmaster tumbling from the car. He investigated matters with a practised eye, and promptly returned to the seat he had been occupying.

"Same car, I feel sure," he said, "but one tyre burst and had to be replaced. Other pumped hard at the same time. We must return and see if we cannot discover the spot where the change was effected."

Closely watching every foot of the road, they had covered some five miles before they reached the spot for which they were seeking.

"Be careful," warned Mr. James. "Don't step on the road yet. Look at it from the side."

It was well indeed that they followed his advice, for presently Dick gave vent to a bellow of excitement. "Say," he shouted, "what's this? I do believe that Tom has been too much for 'em. Hooray! Mr. James, come and see what I've found."

They crowded about the spot, Dick motioning his enthusiastic comrades to keep well away.

"They stopped to put the tyre on here; for that they had to jack up the car," he explained. "Well, any extra weight makes the job very hard. Tom was told to get out. He stood here: these are his foot-marks. When they were busy, and not watching, he put his own special mark down for us to read."

"They? More than one of the rascals? Tom's left a mark? What?"

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The Colonel fired off the questions one after another, and rapidly Dick answered.

"Three men," he said with a decisiveness there was no gainsaying. "Anyone can tell that. It's written as clear as possible. Here's Tom, the fourth. He stood at the side of the car, and seems to have dodged



behind it. Then he made his mark. Now, ain't that like him; ain't that extra cute?"

There was no denying the fact. Scrawled in the mud, probably with the tip of a finger, and immediately behind where the car must have been stationed during the change of tyres, there was the impression of a large fox head. To the left of the head was the figure 4.

"Tom's number in the Fox Patrol," shouted Kinchin.

To the right was the number 2, and immediately beneath it the letters SN.

"Number four scout, of the Fox Patrol, of the

Sign of the Fox Patrol 193

Second Slimington troop," said Scoutmaster James solemnly, reading the sign rapidly. "And—stand clear all—above the sign an oblong, with an arrow pointing up the road. That means a letter is within three paces, or as near as circumstances would allow of his placing it."

"Here!" bellowed Billy. "See, he daren't put it at the side of the road. He made his sign immediately behind the car, and put the note underneath it, probably just when the tyre-changing was finished. Oh, don't Tom deserve something for sharpness?"

They pounced upon the mud-stained scrap of paper and handed it to the Colonel. He took it with trembling fingers and opened what was actually a sheet torn from a pocketbook. And then he read the words aloud.

"Clean-shaven man, with American accent, together with another who wears a beard, and who is undoubtedly the one who attempted to run us down on the river. Latter unquestionably Raines of Slimington, disguised. Chauffeur a stranger almost to them. Heard them talk of a farm fifteen miles on, to north of road. Am keeping up my pecker. Handcuffed; Raines with a revolver."

The words were scrawled in pencil, while in several places the point had punctured the paper. Add to that the fact that a passing cart had half-buried it beneath the mud.

"Took the opportunity and made the most of it," said Scoutmaster James. "Don't like that revolver."

The Colonel was shaking; the very mention of it redoubled his fears. In losing Tom so suddenly, he felt just as he would have done had it been a son who had been abducted.

As for Dick, he clenched his hands and stood looking before him as if he were thinking of something.

"Anything more?" he asked abruptly. "Then we're losing time. There's a farm to be found and searched; they may have spent the night there."

Very silently and thoughtfully the party clambered aboard the car again, which set forward this time at a pace which was furious. It satisfied even the wishes of Dick Brown, and wings would hardly have been too speedy for him. It took them nearly an hour to discover the side track by which the fugitive car had left the main road, for it happened that the surface had changed considerably. Macadam, hard and somewhat slow-drying, had now become fine gravel, which showed scarcely a trace of mud or moisture. But small errors lead to great findings. The chauffeur had turned his car so quickly that a wheel had run over the low bank at the corner of the turn, showing clearly that a car had passed that way. It caused the Colonel to speed up his engine, so that before many minutes had passed they came to the farm which they were seeking. But their quest was not over, the car had left that very morning, in the small hours, and its destination was not mentioned. Three men were aboard, and one youth, who, the farmer was informed, was somewhat crazy, and was about to be placed in an asylum. The car went straight on towards the north, and would run on to a main road some six miles distant.

"And that runs east and west," said the Scout-master. "No good waiting, Colonel. Better push on and telephone to the Sergeant from the next police station."

It was at the latter place, in fact, that staggering news reached them. "Two men and a youth booked and sailed for Canada on *Maple Leaf* late this morning," read the telegram. "Impossible to stop them."

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The Colonel covered his eyes with his hands, and shook visibly.

"It means murder," he said brokenly. "At sea those ruffians will have every opportunity. They will push him overboard to-night or to-morrow at latest. I see it all. They give out that he is crazy, and declare that he broke from his guardians and leaped into the sea. This is too horrible!"

His face was ghastly pale, while Dick's was no better. The lad bit his lip till the blood ran, as he gulped very hard at something. For Tom Stapleton was his greatest chum, more like a brother, and Dick dared not think that he was gone for ever, that he must now do entirely without him.

CHAPTER XIV

Two Thoroughgoing Rascals

WHILE Dick Brown and his friends are puzzling their brains to decide what to do under the circumstances of Tom Stapleton's disappearance, and urgent cablegrams are flashing from England to Canada and in the reverse direction, let us return to that eventful afternoon when Tom stepped from the train at the junction, and, unsuspecting of any rascality, entered the waiting car.

"Be at Slimington in half an hour, sir," said the chauffeur, touching his hat as he took the driving seat. "Fast car this; makes the miles fly."

He set the car rapidly in motion, drove out of the town, and then accelerated his engine till the vehicle was traversing the road at fifty miles an hour. There was a saturnine smile on the man's face, while before his eyes he kept the memory of the men whom he had met three days before in a neighbouring house of refreshment. He recollected the careful manner in which they had approached him; how, quite accidentally, he had discovered that they had some connection with the criminal class, of which he too was not altogether innocent. Then he had been shown some gold, and a certain matter had been mooted to him.

"No danger for you in it," he had been assured. "You come with us to Slimington the evening before this boy returns from school. Then we break into

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the Colonel's garage. That'll be simple enough, as no one sleeps on the premises, and there is no dog. A fellow like you can easily do something to his machine to put it out of order, something not easily noticed, but effective for all that."

The rascally chauffeur smiled again as he thought of his own cleverness. To a man such as he, versed in the management of motor cars, the task had been infinitely simple, requiring but a few moments to execute.

"Done it before now for a lark," he told himself. "Took off the earth wire from the ignition apparatus, and replaced it with a piece of round, solid rubber, with a strip of wire at each end. I'd defy anyone to discover the fault in an hour. The wire looks right; that's the secret. It isn't till you cut right through it that you find it's solid rubber, with a conductor only at each end and nothing but rubber in the middle. It did for them nicely."

The trick had, indeed, put the Colonel's car out of commission for a while, till the cause of the derangement was discovered. At the same time it was learned that the door of the garage had been opened by a skeleton key.

"And they've paid me ten pounds down too," said the rascal to himself, "with twenty more when we reach the docks. Good! That money's mine."

He peered along the road ahead of him, and some ten minutes later, when the car was traversing a lonely part of the road, began to slow down. Just opposite a fingerpost, backed by a number of thick bushes, he applied his brakes sharply and came to a standstill.

"Something wrong with the engine," he said. "Come and see."

It was just the thing to interest Tom. He stepped

from the car and bent over the engine, his back to the bushes. A minute later he suddenly became conscious of the fact that two strangers were beside him. They seemed to have sprung up from the ground, and had made not so much as a sound, for green turf was under their feet. As to their intentions, they let little time elapse before making him aware of them. Indeed it was only when one of the strangers threw his arms round Tom's neck, covering his eyes with both hands, that our hero became actually aware that there was anyone near save the chauffeur. The attack took him so completely by surprise that for the moment he was dumbfounded, and did not even struggle. Then a hand was seized by the chauffeur, while the other was gripped by the second stranger. Quick as a flash the latter clipped something over the wrist, and passed a piece of steel to the chauffeur. Click! Something snapped over the wrist. Then there was the clank of a chain.

"Handcuffed! This is getting beyond a joke." Tom wrenched himself round, and away from the arms which embraced him. Instantly his eyes took in the whole situation, and caught the glint from the steel cuffs fixed round his wrists.

"What does this mean?" he demanded angrily.

"Jest get into the car," commanded one of the strangers, a short, thick-set man, wearing a beard. "Hop in lively."

There was a threat in the man's voice; but Tom did not heed it. For here was another surprise. In an instant he made two discoveries. This was the very man who had been aboard the launch at Eton, while the voice, the figure—everything told him that Raines stood before him.

"So it's you, Raines of Slimington, wanted badly by the police," he said.

Raines went red with anger. "Hop in," he commanded.

"Why? What do you mean by this outrage?"

Fearful of discovery, the smallest delay enraged these conspirators. Indeed, Tom saw the other two anxiously peering up and down the road. As for Raines, he became purple on this occasion, and rushed at our hero.

"Get in!" he shouted. "I'll make you!"

But Tom cooled his ardour the next moment. Though he was handcuffed, he could yet use both fists together, and out they shot promptly, striking the ruffian full in the face.

"You'll make me, will you?" gasped Tom, his anger rising. "Take these handcuffs off me at once, or I'll teach you and these other rascals something. What? You threaten me with a revolver!"

The sight of the weapon which Raines was at that instant endeavouring to draw from his pocket, and the trigger of which had become entangled in the lining, enraged our hero. He already guessed what this attack meant, and in a flash realized his serious position. He was handcuffed, it was true, but he was not yet conquered. Straightway he threw himself upon his captors. The chauffeur had placed a heavy spanner on the footboard when he descended, to make the tale of engine trouble appear more plausible, and Tom seized it in both hands. Up went his arms above his head, and then jerked forward. The spanner struck the rascal Raines heavily below the chin, causing him to howl with pain and stagger backwards. Then Tom launched himself upon the chauffeur, who happened to be nearest, and with one well-directed blow sent him crashing to the ground. When that was done, he had come to end of his resistance. For the third man, who was Anderson, without a doubt—his father's half-brother, if he had

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but known it—leaped behind him, and seized his two arms firmly. Tripping him at once, he threw Tom on to his face, and sat down on him.

“Best be quiet,” he said soothingly. “We’re three to one. You ain’t got a dog’s chance.”

But in his heart of hearts Anderson could not help but admire our hero.

“Gee!” he thought to himself. “A regular spit-fire; a proper glutton for fighting; he’ll give us a bit of trouble.”

“Punch him on the head if he moves again,” came sullenly from Raines, as the latter wiped his chin with a handkerchief, and breathed deeply. “Now, look you here, Tom Stapleton. You can come along quiet as you are, without any more fixings. Or you can come along with your legs tied tight up together, and a rope from them to your arms. I leave it to you to decide what’s most comfortable.”

“Where to?” demanded Tom, thinking swiftly.

“That’s our business. What do yer say? Don’t make a fig of difference to me.”

Raines searched in the back of the car and produced a long coil of rope, placing it where Tom could see it. And the sight of the rope had the effect he imagined, though not for the reason this rascal suggested. For Tom was anything but a fool; he had his full wits about him.

“They’ve got me for the time being,” he thought, “and the more fuss I make the sharper they’ll be with me. I’ll go as I am, and watch for an opportunity. I’ll get into the car as I am,” he called out at length. “Perhaps some time or other you’ll have the goodness to tell me what this outrage means. Of course you all know what will happen when you are discovered and caught? I wouldn’t be in your shoes for something.”

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The very suggestion of punishment did not help to make his captors over pleasant. If the truth had been known, there was not one of them who was cool and comfortable. Their quick, half-frightened glances up and down the road told that tale distinctly.

"Get in!" commanded Raines roughly. "And jest you keep yer lip to yerself, young feller. I ain't here to take no advice from you, nor sauce either. If yer tries it I'll give yer a hiding. See if I don't."

His hand went to his chin, where the spanner had struck him, and he glared at Tom vindictively.

"Can't see why yer want to wait," he growled in Anderson's ear, as the latter stood aside to allow the chauffeur to place Tom in the car. "I could settle him here, easy; and, if he was hidden in them bushes, no one would find him."

No one? Raines's eyes suddenly dilated. A second before he had been confident of the truth of his own statement, and his dislike of our hero and his anger at the blow the lad had inflicted was sufficient to cause him to murder Tom then and there if only Anderson acceded. But would his body lie long undiscovered? That was the question. Raines suddenly bethought him of the Slimington scouts, and growled hoarsely.

"Vipers!" he exclaimed half-aloud. "I ain't so sure as they wouldn't spot him. I ain't a bit certain that they won't be on our tracks this very evening. They seems to have eyes for everything; I shan't feel safe till we're out on the water. It'll be different there, there won't be no botherin' scouts. There won't be no one to see a suppos'd boat tip overboard. Come on! Let's be going," he cried. "And look you here, Tom Stapleton," he added, glaring at our hero. "If you makes a sound or attempts to attract anyone's attention, I'll jest——"

He produced his revolver and showed it to his pri-

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soner. There was a malevolent, reckless look on his puffy face which caused Anderson to smile, while the chauffeur looked a trifle frightened. As for Tom, he by now fully appreciated his serious position and realized that Raines might very well be dangerous. In fact, short though the minutes had been since his capture, and somewhat full of movement, he had already been able to string together certain important incidents. He knew already why a previous attempt had been made to abduct him, and had had his suspicions of that adventure on the river.

"The whole thing is clear now," he said to himself. "Either the chauffeur or the other man is Anderson, father's rascally half-brother. The villain has somehow got into communication with Raines, and in him has found a man only too anxious to help him. They won't, of course, want to keep me; I've been in the way too many years already. Their object is to get rid of me as naturally and secretly as possible, and then to divide the spoil. Well, I am not dead yet by a long way; I'll give 'em something to fight for still."

He had need of all his courage, for the hours which followed were very trying. With Raines's revolver so close to his head that he could feel the cold muzzle Tom dared not move, dared not call out or make a sign as they passed through villages and towns. Once only had he an opportunity. For a minute or more Raines took his eye away from his captive while watching the change of tyres, with the result our reader will have already gathered. After that it was useless to approach the farmer when the car came to a rest there for the night. For the ruffianly captors gave it out openly that Tom was a lunatic and somewhat dangerous. And on the third ship, when at length they arrived at the docks, and crossed the decks of the *Maple Leaf*, the same story followed. Tom was hurried to a cabin, where, as the

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hours passed, either Raines or Anderson were constantly present. He took his meals there, and for forty-eight hours remained without movement.

"You'll have a chance for a breath of air," said Raines, as the evening drew on, "but no larks, mind you. Everyone on the ship knows as there's a lunatic aboard, so it won't matter much if you do shout. But you'll be brought down here again at once, and it's the last chance we'll give you of an outing."

"Or I shall be tossed into the sea. Which?" wondered Tom. Indeed he could not discover why it was the attempt had not been made on the first evening.

Let the reader imagine his terrible position. Let him recollect that Tom was aware of the intentions of his captors, that his death was what they aimed at. Under the circumstances it would not have been remarkable, had the young fellow broken down utterly under the strain of such a trying situation. Indeed, on more than one occasion he was on the verge of giving way to despair. Then his natural courage and determination helped him.

"I'll cheat the brutes yet," he thought. "If they run me to the side in the darkness, I'll shout as loud as possible. I'll make the utmost noise and cling to one of them. That's it. I'll get a grip of one of the rascals, and then see if there will be any throwing me overboard."

But, to his relief, on this the first occasion when he was allowed on deck no attempt was made to harm him. Anderson and Raines each took one of his arms, having removed the handcuffs, in case a light on deck should shine on them. And in that manner they marched their prisoner up and down. As to meeting other passengers, there was not one about. Two only of the deck lamps remained illuminated, and the only people who observed the promenaders was a passing

quartermaster, and the captain and the second mate who happened to be together on the bridge of the steamer.

"Can't make it out why they travel with a lad in that condition," observed the former shrewdly, as his eye caught a glimpse of the three figures. "The boy's a harmless idiot, it seems, though the view I got of him made me think he was a better and sharper type than either of his guardians. Still, as they say he's an idiot, I suppose that's right enough. But why travel with him?"

"People live in Toronto," replied the Mate. "Went out there three years ago and made a home, then sent for the youngster. Perhaps they hope that Canada will do something for him; but I'm not so sure that we shan't have the lad with us on the return trip."

"Eh?" asked the Captain. "Why? I hope not. People who are strange are always a bother. You never know when they'll be up to tricks; going overboard is one of their special fancies."

"Why shall we have him on the trip back?" repeated the Mate. "Why, sir, because he'll have to pass the immigration officer. People of his stamp are not admitted to the country."

That set the Captain thinking deeply. He asked himself why, if this latter statement was a fact, the guardians of the lad abroad were not aware of it. He told himself that they must have made enquiries, and went off to his cabin puzzling greatly. As to Anderson, the situation was one which he had not failed to consider.

"You see, Captain," he observed on the following day, when the latter questioned him, "there are exceptions to every rule. This lad is hardly what you'd call an idiot. He had a severe fall five years ago, and the trouble resulted from it. Ever since he's been

getting gradually better, so that the doctors tell us he'll be the same as you and me before very long. Well, now, we believe that once he's joined his own people his cure'll be more rapid. So we've brought him along, and have special certificates to show to the authorities. If they won't accept them, why then it can't be helped."

He went off smiling. In the blackness of his heart he was telling himself that the question of Tom's admission to the country would never arise, for he would never reach it.

"'Twouldn't have done to have pitched him over at the very beginning," he told himself, "because there's so many ships about he might have been picked up. But out here we're right. We're a little north of our usual course, and so out of the run of steamers; to-night we'll fix him."

The heartlessness of this rascal and his companion would have made an ordinary man weep. To think that they could thus steal the life of a young fellow who had done them no injury; but to Anderson Tom's existence was sufficient injury alone, while Raines had the bitterest thoughts about him.

"Don't care how soon we get done with it," he told Anderson, as they stood whispering in the alleyway outside Tom's cabin. "To-night'll do well. Of course we give a shout, don't we; make a fuss and all that?"

Anderson nodded, while a cruel smile crossed his lips. "We're going to make it look like the real thing," he told his comrade. "At ten o'clock you bring him up."

Somehow or other Tom had an intuition that this was to be his last promenade on the decks. There was something about his two guardians which told their secret; and our hero made his own preparations. He took advantage of the opportunity when both were

outside his cabin to reach for and take down one of the cork lifebuoys which are always in the cabins. Then, stripping off his coat, for the handcuffs had been entirely removed by now, he donned the belt and replaced the garment.

"Not much good, right out at sea," he told himself with a sickly smile, "but better than nothing, especially to a chap who means to make a fight for it."

He lay down on the bunk till Raines summoned him, and then clambered to the deck between the two villains. And very soon he noticed that he was being kept on the after deck, where the illumination was extremely poor. The thought of the coming struggle filled him with apprehension, and for a moment he could hardly drag one leg after the other. Then, of a sudden, he braced himself to meet the trial which he felt was coming. And come it did with unusual suddenness. Without a word of warning Raines stooped and gripped his legs, while Anderson took him by the shoulders, holding both his arms fixed to his side. There was a quick jerking movement, and before Tom could so much as place a finger on either of the men he was bounding over the rail. What followed he hardly knew. He gave one desperate shout, and then plunged beneath the water.

"Man overboard! man overboard!" shouted Anderson at the top of his voice. "Stop her! Man overboard!"

He gave vent to the words the instant Tom's body splashed into the sea, and, turning, prepared to run towards the bridge. But there was a surprise in store for him. The dim light showed him and the villain Raines that a tall man was rushing at them, and in a flash they recognized one of the burly quartermasters. Nor did the officer keep them long waiting to under-

stand his wishes. He floored first Raines, and then the other villain, with crashing blows from his fists.

"I saw ye!" he gasped. "You flung him over: see if I don't get you hanged for this." Then the special matter before him occupied his attention. "Man overboard!" he bellowed. "Stop her, sir; let go that flare from the bridge."

At once something shot downwards past him, and splashed into the water. There was a flash of light from the surface of the sea, and when he looked over the rail a bright flare was burning over a buoy which was rapidly disappearing.

Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle! The bridge indicator rang musically, and the ship suddenly appeared to lose that sense of life one feels when the engines are vibrating. A man leaned over the rail of the bridge, and sent a stentorian hail into the darkness.

"Quartermaster Harkness."

"Here, sir," came from the individual who had knocked Raines and Anderson to the deck.

"Out the port lifeboat. Pick up that buoy, and search thoroughly. Who was it?"

"The lad, sir. I saw these here two blackguards pitch him overboard. I've just been a smashin' of 'em."

There was an exclamation from the bridge, then the clatter of boots on the ladder leading to it. It was the second mate who put in an appearance.

"What?" he demanded, looking at the quartermaster, and then at Raines and Anderson, the latter two in the act of picking themselves up.

"Seed them two blackguards heave the boy over the rail, sir," said the quartermaster without a trace of hesitation. "Hang me if they ain't murderers! I seed it all with my own eyes. Blest if I wouldn't like to kill 'em."

He squared his shoulders and doubled his fists, causing the two villains to squirm. Indeed Raines was scarcely able to stand on his feet, so terrified was he. Not so much at the aspect of the quartermaster, though the appearance of the latter, honest fellow, was enough in all conscience, but because he realized that at last he was cornered. The law, the very mention of which had always been uncomfortable, had at length set its cold, firm hand on him.

"You saw them throw the boy over? You swear it?" asked the Mate.

"Yes, sir; I seed it with these two eyes. They're murderers."

"Then leave them to me. They're swinging out the boat; go at once."

He watched the quartermaster racing away along the deck. Then he turned on the two men; and there was a cold, steely glint in the Mate's eyes as he addressed them.

"You two hounds will come to the charthouse with me," he commanded. "Any attempt at escape will meet with—well, I'll give you just what Harkness promised. Any arms?"

He was absolutely fearless of the two. His very coolness and iciness overawed them. Promptly he ran his hands through their pockets, discovering that each carried a revolver.

"Now march in front," he ordered, relieving them of the weapons. "No hankey-pankey, mind, or you'll wish you'd never been born."

Meanwhile the port lifeboat was swung out, and lowered with her crew. By the time she reached the water every passenger aboard the ship was an eager witness. The oars dipped; she pulled away into the darkness, towards the flare, now far in the distance.

CHAPTER XV

Canadian Boy Scouts to the Rescue

"BOAT, ahoy! Boat, ahoy!"

The hail came from the bridge of the *Maple Leaf* in the Captain's stentorian tones. And then, dimly across the water, the answer sounded: "Aye, aye, sir. Ship ahoy!"

To every one of the passengers there came that eerie feeling when aboard a ship at night, in mid ocean, with nothing but darkness about them. More than that, it had already leaked out that a dastardly attempt had been made, and made successfully, to throw a lad overboard, and that the port lifeboat was away in search of the youth.

"Boat ahoy! Have you found him?"

Breathlessly all waited for the answer. The Captain leaned far over the bridge rail till it looked as if he would overbalance. His face was hot, in spite of a cold breeze. His eyes were glued to his nightglasses. And on his lips were words of huge indignation, bitter words which welled straight up from his heart.

"Hounds! brutes!" he was muttering. "If only I could have guessed it. If only we had the ship fitted with Marconi installation, I am sure I should have had some warning. These men abducted the boy. They fooled us with their tale of his being an idiot; and now they've murdered him."

He dropped the glasses with an exclamation of disgust, and raised the megaphone.

Tom Stapleton

"Boat, ahoy! Where is he? Why don't you answer?"

"Can't find him," came wailing across the water. "Wasn't near the flare."

A shudder went through the passengers. The Captain growled out something beneath his breath, while the second mate, esconced with his prisoners in the charthouse, heard the answering hail through the open port, and, seeing Raines stand to his feet to listen, threw him back on to the settee with unnecessary roughness.

"Sit down, you hound!" he commanded. "I'd heave you overboard willingly, but that I wouldn't cheat a hangman for more money than I'm ever likely to earn. Just you mark my orders; I'm not above making a man like you wish he wasn't living."

There was something extraordinarily breezy and sailor-like about this mate, and something besides, which friends of his would have declared to be unusual. For he was a mild-spoken man as a rule. Direct and outspoken as becomes a sailor, no doubt, but courteous with it all. Here, however, he displayed an acidity of temper quite unheard of, while he made no effort to hide his threatening looks.

"Pah!" he said; "it makes me ill to have to watch a couple of brutes such as you are. Men, do you call yourselves! Men who murdered a boy."

Yes, murdered. For the boat was almost alongside now, the *Maple Leaf* having been manœuvred back towards her. The passengers watched anxiously as the falls were hooked on, and the men above manned the tackle. They watched as if still there might be a chance for our hero. Then they turned aside with a sigh, and gathered into knots of threes and fours to discuss the situation.

Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle. Once more the indicator

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sounded. A throb shot down the length of the decks, while the night became suddenly chill. Tinkle, tinkle. The *Maple Leaf* rounded up to her course, the few stars in the firmament above seeming to swing, then she put her nose in the water, and for a while the only sounds to be distinguished were the hiss and swish of the sea as it raced musically past her, and the subdued tones of men and women talking.

"Starboard! Stop her! Stop her. Back her for your lives!"

The seaman stationed on the forepeak gave vent to the warning at the top of his voice, and swung round to wave his arms to the officers on the bridge. "Stop her!" he bellowed. "An iceberg!"

But he might as well have given no warning for all the effect it had. Indeed it appeared afterwards that while the lifeboat was in search of our hero a strong wind and current had been floating the berg clear across the course of the steamer. But for the necessity of stopping to search the sea for Tom, the *Maple Leaf* would have been far ahead, out of harm's way long ago. But the hour's delay had destroyed her. The berg had been swept down, and once the steamer was on her course again, and things on board had begun to disentangle themselves from the confusion incidental to such an affair as a man overboard, her head was pointed towards the very heart of the iceberg. Then, too, it was one of those intensely dark nights, in spite of the few stars visible, while to add to the difficulty this berg was not one of those huge, stately masses of ice towering to a pointed pinnacle, but a low berg, with ice-floes projecting from it. It lay, therefore, almost invisible, and as a consequence the ship was pounding into it in the space of a few minutes.

"Back her! Back her!" shouted the Mate. Tinkle, tinkle! The indicator bell sounded as musically as

ever. The ship shuddered from end to end. But the grinding crash of icefloes at her forefoot did not cease. She stopped suddenly, there came a roar as of an explosion, and the ship jerked on again some fifty paces, the slither and crackle of ice about her. She halted a second time, only to forge ahead again; then came the final crash. Her bows hit up against a solid mass of ice, ten times as big as the ship herself, and promptly she lost all her way. Bang! Every passenger aboard was thrown from his feet, while the foremast snapped with the report of a gun, and went tumbling along the length of the deck. Afterwards, in the silence which followed, there came the groaning of an injured man, and then the scrape and movement of many feet. The passengers were rising again to a vertical position.

"Mr. Watson," came a hail from the bridge.

"Sir?"

"Get down to Mr. Onam and ask him to switch on all the deck lights. Let's have that flare rigged we use for lading in harbour. Ask what damage there is in the engine room."

The voice was calm. There was not a tremor about it, and when one of the women passengers called up to the bridge in a whimpering voice the Captain answered still more calmly.

"Anything to fear, madam? Why, at present, nothing. Please go to your cabins at once, put on your warmest clothing, and secure your money and jewels. Then make for the saloon. At the moment the ship seems perfectly secure. Please do as I ask you."

He watched them file away in their several directions, and then swiftly gave other orders.

"Get down below and report what water there is," he said to his first officer. "Ah, Harkness, that you?"

"Sir?" came the answer.

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"Find Mr. Watson. He's gone down to the engine room. Bring his report to me, and ask him at once to superintend the preparation of the boats. Send the purser here as you pass his office."

There was the best of order everywhere. Within half an hour of the ship's striking the iceberg every boat aboard was fully victualled, while the passengers were assembled in the saloon and were partaking of a satisfying meal. Meanwhile the immediate surroundings of the ship were made as light as a number of electric flares would make them, and a curious condition was discovered. The ship had run up on an icefloe, and had then struck abruptly against the face of the berg. The jar of the impact had stove in her fore plates, so that the fo'castle was already half-filled with ice debris and snow.

"Humph!" said the Captain when he had carefully inspected everything, and had ascertained that the hold right forward was also encroached upon by blocks of ice forced through the gaps in her plates. "A nasty position, but might have been heaps worse. If it weren't for the passengers I should not feel in the least degree anxious. But the icefloe might let us through any moment, when she'd fill and founder, or, at any rate, be in the gravest danger. Could you do much with her, Mr. Onam?"

The engineer chief, a burly individual of slow and taciturn disposition, cast a wary eye at the broken plates forward. He balanced himself on a huge block of ice and leaned one hand against the ship, for the two officers had been slung out on to the floe.

"With fair weather like this we'd make her seaworthy in a week," he said. "If it comes on to blow, nothing can save her. She'll shake herself through and go to the bottom."

"A risk we'll take, Mr. Onam. It'll be light in an

hour. I'll send the boats away promptly. If they steer south and west they'll soon be in the track, and will be picked up by passing vessels. I shall leave you to get out measurements and make ready to put your men at the work."

They swarmed aboard again by means of a rope ladder, and while the engineer set about his own preparations, the Captain went to the saloon, reassured his passengers, and then saw that boats were in readiness.

"Thank heavens we have plenty of them!" he thought. "Also, that the weather is so fine and calm. I'll be glad to get rid of my passengers."

It was with a sigh of relief, in fact, that he at length saw the boats sail away from the iceberg. A natural landing stage had been found close to the stern of the vessel, which latter part was overhanging the water. Here all the boats required were hauled, passengers and crew helping. Then the women and children were evenly divided amongst the number, a crew placed in each boat, and sails hoisted.

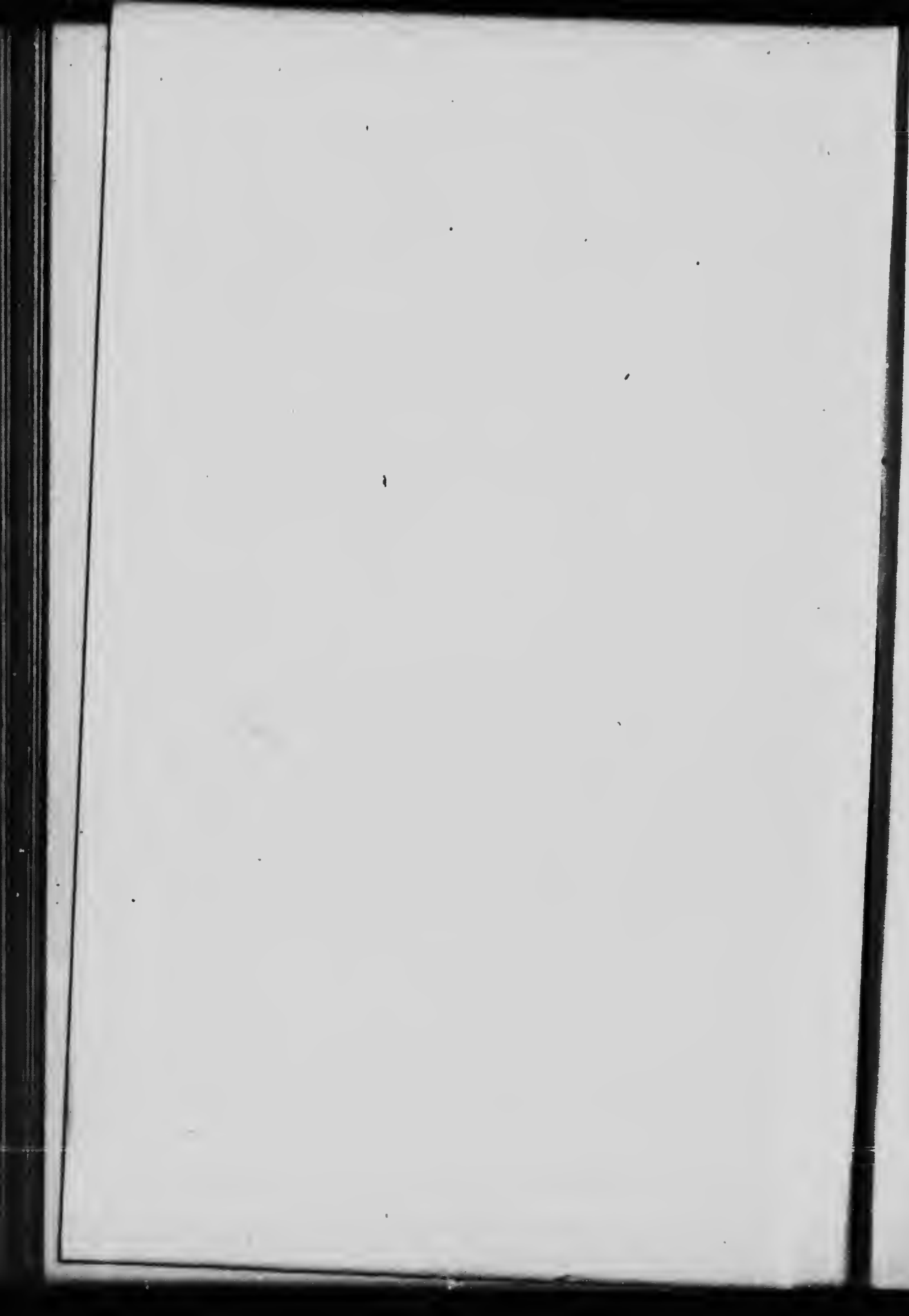
"Couldn't have been better," observed the Captain. "With a little luck we shall save the ship, while I have little fear for their safety. Let us buckle to at it."

Every possible precaution was taken to assure that the vessel could not roll on to her side and stave in her other plates. Huge cables were passed to anchors wedged in the ice a distance away, while a forge and an enormous work bench were lowered over the side right forward. Here a gang of engine fitters were soon engaged, some cutting away the torn and crumpled plates, while others prepared to drill the holes for the rivets. It was while they were in the midst of the work that a call from above attracted their attention. Someone was clambering down the steep face of the ice cliff, his fingers and toes gripping every little irregularity. Once he turned to hail the people down below.



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TOM'S STRANGE REAPPEARANCE



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But an instant later all his energies were required to accomplish the task before him. As to the Captain and the crew of the *Maple Leaf*, they watched in amazement, wondering who this stranger could be, and from whence he came.

"Stranded like ourselves," ventured the former. "Wrecked on the far side. Has been prospecting the berg and happened to sight us. He'll be able to give us information as to its size. I imagine it to be enormous, and if it hadn't been that we have our hands so full I should have sent a man to the top to take observations. Gee! That was a slide! He nearly lost his footing."

Nearly! The climber slithered down the steep face of the berg for some ten yards, till his body became wedged in a friendly crevice. He loosened himself with an effort, descended some little distance, and again lost all footing. On this occasion there was no crevice to arrest his progress. He came down the face of the berg as if he were a shot dropped from the summit. Then his body met a spot where the inclination was not so severe. He travelled down it, his arms and legs spread in all directions, shot across a wide gap in the ice, in which, had he happened to have fallen, he would probably have remained till the berg entirely melted, and finally, rolling now head over ears, landed breathless at the feet of the workers. Then he sat up and regarded those who surrounded him.

"Halloo!" he gasped. "It's you!"

A shout came from the Captain. He rushed forward with the second mate beside him, seized the hand of the newcomer and wrung it warmly.

"Lor'!" he cried, "how glad we are to see you. So you didn't drown?"

A vigorous shake of the head was his answer.

"Cold and hungry?" came the next interrogation.

Tom Stapleton

"Cold? No. You do a little bit of ice climbing and see how it warms you. Hungry? Rather!"

Who could have mistaken the broad smile on the features of the stranger? Even the Captain and his officers, who had hardly set eyes on their passenger, and then only in the dim light allowed on deck late at night, realized that this youth must be the one for whom they had so recently sent a boat to search, that this was the lad whom the villains on the *Maple Leaf* had attempted to murder by casting him over the rail. For Tom it was, Tom Stapleton, rosy and full of enthusiasm, his body steaming after long exertion, his face flushed red with health and enjoyment. Also there was something very like a tear in his eyes, for none but Tom knew what a relief the sight of friends was to him. As to an appetite, why, it would have done Dick Brown and the Colonel good to have seen him some few minutes later.

"Now tell me all about it," asked the Captain. "Those blackguards threw you overboard."

"You knew that?" demanded Tom greatly surprised.

"The quartermaster saw them in the act: he floored them beautifully. We put them under arrest; but of course, since this happened, they have had to be liberated. They will be handed over to the authorities when the boats conveying the passengers have reached Canada or Newfoundland. But you went into the water."

"And narrowly missed being chopped to pieces by the propellers, grumbled Tom. "That's the worst of these twin-screw boats, the propellers stand out so far that they are likely to hit anyone who is passing. Then I saw the flare dropped, and tried to make across to it. But I had suspected what actually happened. I managed to slip a lifebelt beneath my jacket, and that kept me from making my way through the water."

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Besides, there was a current which seemed to sweep me along level with the ship. Of course I shouted till I was hoarse; but the more noise I made the farther I went. Soon I was quite a distance ahead, and after a while I saw the ship come round and steam past me. It was awful to feel that I was all alone in the water. I felt like pulling the lifebelt adrift and ending my troubles."

"Terrible! It must have been a horrid sensation," agreed the Captain. "What then?"

"I felt my hand touch something very cold some two hours later. I was numbed through and through then, for the water had been getting steadily colder. I was more than half frozen, and I fancy I must have lost consciousness. But I awoke when I felt that solid mass. I clambered on the top of it, then found there was a lot of snow near at hand, and, after swinging my arms about and kicking my feet till I was warm again, I burrowed into the snow, covered myself completely with it, and fell asleep."

"Gee! That was a cute thing to do," cried the Captain. "Well, next time you got your senses you smelled breakfast, eh?"

Tom laughed heartily. "I was frightfully hungry," he admitted. "As soon as it was light I could see I was on an iceberg, and as there was nothing living at the edge I started to climb higher. Then I suddenly sighted your ship, and I can tell you I felt jolly glad."

"Glad that we'd run into the berg!" exclaimed the Captain, feigning indignation, and then laughing. "So should I have been jolly glad to see that other people were aboard the floe. So then you came tumbling down to us—well now, what next? You must amuse yourself. All the hands and officers have their work cut out. We've got to get those plates on her as soon as possible. She may go through the floe at

any moment. If she does, well, we'll have to camp out on the ice till the berg melts, or till someone comes along to fetch us."

"Or till we take to the water again, Captain," smiled Tom. "But I'd like to work, please. Can't I get a job down there for'ard?"

"Why, of course you can. Glad to hear you'd be glad to have something to do. There are some youngsters who would consider themselves too high and mighty to lend a hand."

Tom promptly made his way forward and clambered down the ladder to the ice.

"I've come to work, sir," he said giving the chief engineer the scout's salute. "Please order me to do whatever you think I can carry out."

"Whatever you can carry out. Guess you can carry the rivets from the fire when they're heated. That'll keep you moving; set to, my lad."

Tom put his back into the work with eagerness. It kept him from thinking, for naturally enough, our hero was wondering what was to be the outcome of this strange adventure. For the narrow escape he had had he gave not a second thought, beyond abundance of thanks for such a merciful preservation. But there were those two villains, one of whom was his dead father's half-brother. They had attempted murder, while Raines was already under a cloud in England.

"Of course I have a duty, we all have," he told himself. "Such fellows ought to be followed till they're taken. Besides, supposing I do nothing, I stand the risk of being shot from behind a corner, or of being again run down in the river."

But as we have said, work kept him from thinking, and all that day and well on into the following he toiled with the staff of engineers.

"I'm relieved to see those lower plates in position

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and caulked water-tight," said the Captain, coming to make an inspection. "For the ship is steadily settling into the floe. I doubt if the ice is very thick hereabouts, and her weight is gradually pressing her through. If a wind gets up, she'll break clean through the floe, and if our plates aren't sound by then it'll be serious."

Meanwhile every precaution had been taken against a sudden catastrophe. Canvas tents had been erected some distance from the vessel, and on firm ice, where stores of food were placed, together with two of the boats. The others were kept moored nearer at hand, so that a rush might be made to them.

"Not that it would be a wise thing," said one of the mates, as he sat smoking amongst the men in the tent that evening. "If the ship goes through suddenly there'll be such a commotion that even this huge berg will dance about: a boat would be swamped. I shall be precious glad when that job is finished."

All night and all day the engineer staff toiled, being divided into four watches. And with one of these Tom took his share of the labour. At the end of the third day the ship had sunk very considerably. Indeed, so rapidly did she fall that the ice threatened to overtop the plates as soon as they were riveted in position. It was not till the Plimsoll line was reached and passed that the Captain dared breathe freely.

"I don't care so much now," he smiled. "If she goes through suddenly she's bound to ship a heap of water; but she'll bob up again, so there won't be anything to cry about. Still, I'll be happier when she's completely plated in; for if it blows, and a sea gets up, a hole right for'ard here would be most serious."

It was a fortunate thing for the *Maple Leaf* and her crew that the weather had been so propitious, for by the rate at which the ship sank through the floe with

a quiescent sea it was obvious that with a little movement she would have gone right through in a very short space of time. As it was, by dint of working continuously, as ships' engineers can do when pressed, the plates right forward were got into position before there was any added danger. Then a breeze got up, and very soon all on the berg felt a gentle movement. There were loud reports, whilst splinters of ice shot from the berg in various places. At length there was so much wind that the face of the berg which caught it careened, carrying the whole mass of ice with it. And as the minutes passed the ship sank deeper and deeper, till her Plimsoll line had disappeared altogether.

It was a time of huge anxiety, for none could say what would happen. But a good sailor is one who sticks to his ship, and the Captain proved his mettle by going aboard and inviting all to follow him.

"There's great risk in it," he admitted, "but so there is in remaining on the berg. The ship may plump straight to the bottom. The berg may overturn with this wind and swamp her. A thousand things may happen. We'll get up steam, and hope for the best."

It was well that he acted in this manner, for hardly an hour had passed before the vessel gave a violent lurch to starboard, snapping one of the huge cables which had been passed out to an anchor. And then, slowly and imperceptibly at first, she began to slide from the floe, just as if she were being launched anew. She gathered pace, and in a moment had jerked one of the other anchors free from its holdings.

"Cut those cables through," bellowed the Captain. "Cut 'em; never mind the anchors."

The deck hands rushed with axes to carry out his order, and in a trice the vessel was free. She lurched still farther to starboard, till it looked as if she would

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roll on to the floe; her deck careened at such an angle that Tom had to cling to the rail. But all the while her pace increased, while ice grated against her plates and snapped into thousands of splinters. Suddenly she bobbed deeply into the water, breaking a huge mass of the floe adrift and causing the hearts of all to leap into their mouths. Indeed it was a most unpleasant sensation. It felt for the moment as if she were about to go down bodily. But she bobbed up again quickly, and shook from stem to stern as she cleared herself of a mass of clinging ice.

Tinkle, tinkle. Tom heard the indicator ring some five minutes later, when the way of the vessel had carried her propellers clear. The ship went astern now at a smart pace. Water raced and foamed beside them. Tinkle, tinkle again. She stopped, while men crowded into the boat which was being lowered.

"Going ashore to fetch all the gear," explained one of the mates. "Come and lend a hand."

It was night before they got away from the berg, and none breathed too easily till they were well away from it. Then the battered bows of the vessel were set for the Gulf of St. Lawrence, while men were posted to look out in case the boats with their load of passengers should be about. Three days later the *Maple Leaf* put in at Quebec, while our hero was intensely astonished to perceive amongst the people waiting on the quay faces which were familiar. Indeed he was amazed. But not more so than those who came to meet him. The Colonel, Scoutmaster James, Dick Brown, Kinchin, and Billy simply fell upon him and wrung his hand till it ached.

"Thought you were dead, drowned!" exclaimed Dick, gulping desperately. "Didn't imagine you could be aboard. We only came to make enquiries of the Captain as to how it occurred."

Tom Stapleton

"You see," explained Scoutmaster James, "we took a ship sailing the same night as you left England. She was a fast boat to New York. From there we raced up here in the train, and arrived in time to meet the ship which had picked up the boats carrying your passengers. Of course we heard how you had been flung overboard, and how the search had proved unavailing. We gave you for drowned."

Tom smiled. He felt wonderful hilarious; then he suddenly became serious.

"Those two villains?" he asked.

"Gone," said the Colonel. "How, no one can explain. The ship which picked them up was crowded. It is thought that they slipped ashore in the launch which comes out at Rimouski to collect mails. In any case they have disappeared for the moment."

"But—but you'll follow," gasped Tom.

"I shall search the whole of America and Canada if necessary," declared the Colonel firmly. "Already my plans are maturing. The police are hunting for us, and as soon as we get a clue to their whereabouts we shall make after them."

That very evening, in fact, word of the fugitives was received, and thereafter eager preparations were made to follow.

CHAPTER XVI

Winnipeg Sends a Contingent

PRECISELY one week after Tom Stapleton set foot on shore at Quebec, two birch-bark canoes were being slowly paddled into the mouth of English River, having crossed a short angle of Lake Winnipeg. To those curious enough to watch the craft the people aboard presented something strangely interesting. For the canoes were large, and each carried five people. Of these, one in each boat was undoubtedly a Red Indian, for the feathered head-dress declared that fact positively. As to the others, a watcher some years ago would, no doubt, have been exceedingly puzzled; for the figures were for the most part smaller than those of the Indians, while there was a brown and red tinge about the clothing which was rather unusual. But news travels fast in these days. It was clear that some at least of the voyagers belonged to a troop of boy scouts, for here was the uniform.

"Holiday-making, I'll guess," said a tall fellow who was seated on the shore of the lake. "Ripping they'll find it; this Indian summer's just the time of year to go for an outing. Won't they learn something, too, from those Indian trackers!"

"'Tain't all fun they're out for," observed his friend. "Didn't you hear the ruction?"

The other promptly shook his head and asked for information. Whereat his comrade told him how one,

Tom Stapleton

Tom Stapleton, had been kidnapped in England and had been treacherously tossed overboard on the voyage to Canada.

"Papers has been full of it," he said.

"Don't often get a read at 'em," came the answer.

"Say, but why in thunder aer they here? Lake Winnipeg's not got a cent of connection with the sea. Unless——"

"You've hit it right at once. Them two coves that did the business aboard ship got ashore somehow or other. Wall, now, they've kind of disappeared. But them boy scouts, in Montreal, hearing all about the ruction, and that it was a scout like themselves as was pitched overboard and left to drown, gets their heads close together. Scouting's what they're trained for, and blessed if they didn't manage to rummage out something about them two villains."

"That war cute! How was it?" asked the one who was listening.

"Cute! Them scouts is as cute as a bag o' monkeys. They set to and watched every train coming through Montreal, and put their friends at Toronto, Quebec, Ottawa, and other places where there's troops of scouts, on to follow the same game. Wall, they didn't exactly lay their hands on the two birds they was after, but they traced 'em. Eh? How?"

"Yes, how was it done?" asked his comrade.

"Wall, I can't kinder believe it; but there's a yarn about, and the paper prints it, that them cute beggars learned that one of the criminals was tall and the other short. They guessed they would be along with one another; so they set to work to find a pair of men, tall and short, or a pair of double bootmarks. They hit right on the last of them two propositions."

"You ain't goin' ter stuff me that they could tell

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the difference betwixt footmarks left by two men," cried the other derisively. "Ain't they mostly the same? See here; you're lanky enough. Six foot, I should put you. I'm barely five foot five. Wall, now, do a walk along here. Where's the difference?"

His incredulity was cured before he and his comrade had completed the experiment. For the difference was so marked.

"Got it?" asked the one who had been giving the story.

"You bet. Little chap couldn't stretch the distance of the other. Wall?"

"There's thousands of couples of men goes about in the cities and outside; but, yer see, they ain't always together. Now them cute young chaps spotted marks what seemed likely down Toronto way in the mud outside the station. They took measurements and sichlike of 'em, and sent particulars up and down the country. There was similar marks at Ottawa, where they was seen outside the station and up and down the walk in front of a third-rate sorter hotel. Then not a sign of 'em down Montreal and Quebec way; they was lost for a while. But a wire came from someone at Fort Williams saying he'd been able to discover the marks that was wanted, while blessed if they wasn't seen right down here in Winnipeg. Seems uncanny, don't it?"

It did indeed. Yet if the reader will pause for a moment to consider the matter he will see that there is nothing uncanny about this tale of tracking. For the same pair of boots will make the same class of impression wherever they be until they are worn badly. A short man continues to take short steps whether he be in London or in Canada. And while, in the absence of distinctive heel, or toe, or nailmarks, it might be difficult to tell the difference between

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those left by a short man in either country — one might be inclined to believe them exactly similar—yet there was little room for difficulty in this proposition. Here two criminals were escaping side by side, leaving in their ignorance two pairs of impressions, both absolutely different, but yet, when repeated in other places, so precisely similar to those first observed that there could be no doubt that the men sought for had made them. Measurements, little characteristics for which a scout always looks, made any possible doubt a distinct certainty. And thus it was that Anderson and Raines were tracked to Lake Winnipeg.

“While our two brother scouts here swear they saw the men we want making up the river,” said Tom that morning just before the boats put out.

“You can say that for sure,” came the hearty response from one of the newcomers, by name Jack Benn, a lad of some fifteen years, whose father lived in Winnipeg. “The town’s not so large that a fellow don’t get to learn a whole heap about things that’s going on. Wall, there’s an Indian tracker lives there when he’s got money. Most times he’s guiding shooting parties, or prospectors, and comes in here to spend his money in the saloons. He’s a bad hat, he is, and no mistake. He was here a week back. I saw him myself; so did Frank.”

“And then he just went,” added the latter, whom we must hasten to introduce. Frank was a tall, weedy lad, who had overgrown his strength. Or, rather, it was supposed till a year ago that he had done so. But, strange to say, the fever of scouting had abolished all thoughts of weakness. Frank had astounded his mother, had delighted his father by feats of endurance, and had been known to keep afoot from dawn till night came.

“Just went outer sight,” he said. “But, one

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evening, three days ago, me and Frank was out fishing, and saw old Fire Horse, as he's known, making off in a canoe with a couple of strangers."

"We'd been readin' the papers, you see," explained Jack, interrupting. "We'd seen about this business of yours, and since we fellows in Winnipeg had just started a patrol of our own, we thought it was clear our duty to get looking things up. Those two lots of footmarks was plain outside the shanty that Fire Horse lives in when he's in town. They was down by the landing place. We spotted 'em later on outside the station. There wasn't a mistake about 'em. We measured and compared 'em time and again with the illustrations published in the papers."

Frank nodded his head vigorously. He was a jolly, smiling fellow, and grinned as Scoutmaster James looked his approval. As to his observation concerning the papers, it was true enough. The tale of this curious and eager quest had given huge interest. The journals published latest bulletins with feverish energy, and always, amongst the items, reproductions of the footmarks of the criminals were prominent, together with full measurements.

"Guess they've seen the papers, same as we have, these two ruffians," observed Jack. "They reckoned it was best to get away from civilization for a while; and so they hired old man Fire Horse, and took to the river. Will we come along with you, Colonel? My! That don't want answering."

It was in this manner that the party was arranged, with the addition of two Indian trackers, one being Red Fox, whom Dick Brown had worked with on a former occasion, while the second was known as Eagle. Looking at the latter, Tom could well believe that the man deserved the appellation; for this Red Indian was some forty years of age, as slim and lithe as a youth

of twenty. His muscles as he rowed stood out on his arms like knotted cords, even his facial muscles were plainly visible. As to the face itself, it would have caused envy amongst Parisian sculptors, for the profile was faultless. Seen from the front, every feature of this Indian seemed to combine in some subtle manner to produce the general impression of unusual firmness. About the deep-set eyes there was a something which denoted the untamed spirit of the man, and something more—a relic of savagery, a link with the past, with those Irroquois warriors who had warred in Canada, whose braves were forced to prove heroic courage before they could be even considered amongst the men of the tribes.

Picture Red Fox as an Indian of somewhat similar appearance and you can complete the group aboard those two canoes on the day in question. Paddling slowly, for haste would not help them, the party held their way steadily up the river. Now and again a few words passed between the various occupants, and every half-hour two of the paddlers handed the blades along to their comrades. In the stern of each canoe an Indian sat motionless, his paddle trailing in the water. Sometimes they would exert themselves to the fullest, and then Red Fox, or Eagle, or both together, would steer only, while their eyes were bent closely upon the banks.

“If there’s been a landing they’ll see it,” said Dick, whose memory of backwoods training was returning. “Best not talk to them. They don’t understand much in any case, and words are likely to distract them.”

An hour passed before Eagle gave vent to a guttural exclamation. He held up his paddle, and at once the rowers ceased their labours, while the second canoe drew nearer.

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"Seen something, I guess," said Jack. "He'll tell us in a moment."

Eagle threw a remark over his shoulder, and again bent his eyes on the bank of the river. Then Red Fox answered him in the Indian language.

"Stop here last night. Make fire," declared Eagle curtly.

That set the scouts inspecting every inch of the bank. A cedar forest came close down to the water, and left but little room for a camp. It was therefore only natural that, following Eagle's glances, they should fix their eyes for the most part on a spot where the trees gave back from the water.

"Gee! I don't see a thing," declared Jack, disappointment on his face.

"Except trees. None of them have been cut," chimed in Frank, the second Canadian scout. "An Indian couldn't say from here whether men had been ashore over there. It's something extra obvious."

"Beats me," retorted Dick. "Red Fox seemed a little bothered at first. Say, what's he after? He's looking up at the tree tops."

Indeed that was the impression given by the Indian, and as a natural consequence all eyes were raised.

"Leaves and branches. Nothing else," remarked Tom. "None broken as far as I can see."

"Nothing," agreed Scoutmaster James.

It was left to Billy and Kinchin to make the actual discovery.

"Why," cried the former, "ef there ain't a fire burning."

"Where? Can't see it," came from Tom. "Point to it, Billy."

"He don't see it. He smells it, same as I do," said Kinchin. "See, the two Indians are sniffing as if they were dogs. The smell is getting stronger every

moment as the boats run on up the river. Can't you see?"

"See! Smell, you mean," laughed Dick. "Ah, now I've got it! Some way off I should say. Cedar wood for a dollar."

It proved, in fact, to be the scent from the hot ashes of a fire wherein cedar logs had been burned, and which they soon located well within the forest. Eagle plunged his hand into the mass of half-burned stumps, grunted, and then rose with one of the logs between his fingers. "Stay here last night," he said, as if he were reading a book. "Blow the fire this morning, and cook. Leave it then, and go on up the river. White men smoke different tobacco to Fire Horse."

"Gee! hear him?" cried Jack. "Blessed if I can see a sign of 'bacca."

But Eagle could, and so also Red Fox. The former, in spite of the severity and austereness of his features, evidently took no small interest in this group of young scouts, and soon began to put himself out of the way to instruct them. Rapidly he pointed to some grains of ash on the log in question, and to more on the ground close to the fire. Then, right opposite, he drew their attention to a little heap, browner and coarser than the ash they had been observing.

"Different tobacco," he said. "Fire Horse like stronger. He like the bottle, too. Firewater not good for Indian."

There was, in fact, a broken bottle on the ground, and Jack was able to assure the party that it was such as would contain inferior spirit.

"Low-down whites get hold of the Indian," he said, "and sell him the most awful poison. It makes demons of some of them. The law's down on fellows who sell the stuff."

But Eagle had still more to show the young scouts.

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He took them from the spot where the canoe had been moored at first, and had then been dragged ashore, past the fire a little way into the forest.

"Come through here and take look round; see that no one near," he said. "Then go back to fire and cook. Sleep here, Eagle on one side of fire and the others on this. See the footprints?"

Tom and Dick and his fellow scouts fastened themselves upon those impressions promptly. It was not that they could not take an interest in the other signs which Eagle had pointed out, for they were keenly interested, and blamed themselves for their carelessness in having missed what, when once their attention was drawn to it, appeared to be most obvious spoor. But those footprints were more tangible. It seemed to connect their own efforts with those of the lads of Montreal, of Toronto, of Ottawa, and a number of other places.

"One tall man, one short," said Tom with emphasis.

"Measures, please," cried Dick severely. "No use looking at 'em. We want exact particulars. Mistakes at this period would be too costly."

"Then let's go closer to the water," suggested Kinchin.

"Eh? Why?" Billy looked at his patrol leader as he asked the question.

"Why? Now, really, Billy," came the tantalizing answer, "can't you guess my meaning?"

That brought a shout from the youngster. "Of course! What a tenderfoot I am, to be sure! Carried the canoe there, Kinchin. Fair weight aboard. Weight means deeper impressions. Got it?"

"Time to get on again," said the Colonel, intervening. "I think there can now be no doubt that we are on the track of the particular criminals for whom we

are searching. Mr. James, supposing they show fight? Supposing they have weapons?"

They looked blankly at one another, and then round at the boys. They felt that they were responsible for the safety of the party, and if resistance were offered, and one or more of the scouts injured or killed, what was the Colonel to say to their parents, what could the Scoutmaster explain by way of excuse?

It was Jack who came forward at this moment. "Weapons, sir," he said, tossing his staff from one shoulder to the other. "Of course they have them. Both Frank and I saw rifles across their shoulders. They'll fight if they have a spark of courage in 'em. Say, boys, that makes this chase all the more ripping."

To Tom and Dick and the others there was no doubt that the very mention of possible resistance came as news to be rejoiced at. But to those who were seniors it brought undoubtedly a feeling of uncertainty, the thought that, while for themselves the task was suitable, for their youthful friends it was likely to be too dangerous. But Tom laughed at their fears.

"Why," he cried, "it'll be nothing to that collision of ours with the iceberg. Besides, haven't we a gun between us?"

Dick flourished the weapon. It was a light fowling rifle, carrying a small charge, but capable of execution if the distance were not too great. The lad knew it to be exceedingly accurate.

"Brought it along in case," he said. "Perhaps there'll be need to use it."

"I sincerely trust not," exclaimed the Colonel sternly. "But if they fire on us, then their blood be on their own heads. I have a revolver here, and if one of you lads be wounded I will use it. But let us get into the canoes again. We are wasting time here."

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They scrambled aboard with the utmost care, and once more pressed their way up the river. That evening, as the shadows were fading, they put in at a spot where the robbers had encamped before them, and at once proceeded to erect bivouac shelters.

"Just to keep the heavy dew off," explained Scoutmaster James. "Can't be too careful, for we none of us have a complete change of clothing. Some of you lay the waterproof sheets on the ground, while others bring the blankets. Don't waste time, as it's getting dusk. Now, Billy, get the fire going. You and I will act as cooks."

It was just like old times in the neighbourhood of Slimington, but the surroundings were so different. Here the lads and their seniors were encamped on a river amidst gorgeous scenery which their own native parts could not supply. Every breath they took was redolent of cedar logs, while every sound they heard reminded them of a strange new country, a country filled with gorgeous trees, then in the prime of autumn foliage, with rivers and lakes the like of which they had never seen before. It was all splendid! It was a day in their lives, and with the enjoyment of it all came the thought that they were doing a duty.

"Following two of the biggest rascals ever seen in Canada," said the Scoutmaster, as they sat round the fire after supper, "and following them through a country new to most of us. Ah, if only those at home could take a peep at these parts, and remember that they all belong to the Empire! Boys, cups up! Drain them to the Empire!"

Youthful heads were tilted up, youthful mouths opened, and down as many eager throats there poured the remains of a kettle of wonderful cocoa. Then heads began to nod, for the exercise had been somewhat arduous.

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"We'll do sentry-go two at a time," decided Scoutmaster James. "I'll go on first with the Colonel. Tom and Dick follow two hours later, then Jack and Billy, then Frank and Kinchin. Redfox and Eagle don't look as if they ever sleep."

Let the boy scout who reads this story place himself in that camp on this night in question. It was Tom's turn to watch with Dick, and for a while they stood close together beside the fire, talking in low voices. Then they separated, each to the end of his beat, only to rejoin one another after some few minutes.

"Rummy, ain't it?" smiled Dick. "Gave me the jumps the first time I kept watch in the forest. There are so many strange voices."

Tom agreed with him with a short nod. He had already decided in his own mind that a night watch in a Canadian forest was calculated to make a coward run away from his own shadow. For branches creaked in all directions, while now and again a gust of wind came whistling and moaning through the leaves. Then, far off, somewhere on the river, there came the dull boom of frogs disporting themselves on some reedy bottom. But the owl caused the harshest disturbance. It circled above him more than once, and on each occasion sending out a blood-curdling screech, as if to protest at his presence.

But all nights come to an end. The following morning found the scouts plunging in the river. Half an hour later they had finished breakfast.

"And now we discuss our plans for the day," said the Colonel. "Eagle considers that we have reached a point where an expedition might well be sent along the bank. For this purpose we will divide. Tom, Dick and Frank will go with Eagle, and keep on this bank. Red Fox will take Kinchin and Jack along the other. Keep abreast of the two canoes, and go slowly.

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Recollect that there will be only two to paddle, and that one of the boats will be tied behind the other."

The suggestion met with the unstinted approval of the scouts. They hastened their preparations, and then fell in to be inspected before departing. A few minutes later the only visible members of the expedition were the Colonel and the Scoutmaster, with Billy paddling behind them. The others had plunged into the forest, and though at times the well-known call of the Fox Patrol came across the water, there was not a sign of one of them. The search for Anderson and Raines had indeed taken on a more serious complexion.

CHAPTER XVII

Padding up the English River

"SAY, now, here's a riddle," exclaimed Jack, the Canadian scout, standing on the edge of the river bank and staring out across the stream. "I don't say as we can't read it; but right now I'm fixed—fixed sure."

"And you haven't spotted a single thing to guide you?" asked Tom, standing beside him, and looking huge in comparison.

The scout shook his head. "Here have we been tramping it through the woods and glades these last two days, and a real jolly experience it has been, but for spoor it's been wellnigh empty. We've found the remains of fires lit by those two rascals and Fire Horse, but nothing more. We know that they are sticking to the river, that's all."

"While we have at this moment arrived at a part where the river divides. My! This is a teaser," declared Tom.

The difficulty was indeed no ordinary one, such as common sense and keen observation could help them to unravel. Up till now the pursuit had presented no great tax upon the powers of the scouts. They had taken it in turns to march along either bank, while others paddled the canoes. Now, after two days of travel, they had come to a spot where the river divided, a spot, to be accurate, where two branches

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of this stream, known as English River, joined to make one thick trunk.

"Which arm had the robbers taken?" they asked themselves. "The right or the left?"

"There's one way, and a certain way too, of deciding," said Kinchin in his matter-of-fact fashion when he had joined the group. "We can send a party up either stream. The one which finds a trace of a camp fire will have discovered which way the ruffians went. There's one thing certain, they haven't abandoned the canoe and taken to the banks. We'd have spotted that quickly."

"Then suppose we wait a little till the canoes come abreast of us," said Dick. "Red Fox and Eagle are taking a turn aboard to-day, and maybe will be able to clear the mystery."

That it was a mystery for the moment was clear, though each one of the group knew that it could be unravelled. But to start up either of the river arms meant inevitably some waste of time, and time, the Colonel and the Scoutmaster had informed them, was of the greatest importance.

"I'll tell you why," explained the former the previous evening in their camp when supper had been eaten. "Those men probably do not imagine that they are being followed. Therefore, now that they are, as it were, well away from civilization, they will not trouble to hurry. I reckon our rate of progress to have been more rapid. We were a day late in starting, and we have now perhaps made up half that number of hours. We are that much nearer; the faster we push on the more sure we are of coming up with them and taking the rascals."

Some little time later the two canoes put in an appearance, and a grunt escaped the Indians when they learned that their young friends were baffled.

"We knew you would find difficulty here," said Red Fox in his guttural English, which, by the way, was not very extensive; just sufficient, in fact, to explain himself. "Stay here; Eagle and I will look about for something."

It made Tom's cheeks flush with mortification, and Dick stamp his feet, when Eagle came to an abrupt stop at a point on the bank where the two lads had already passed. The Indian's fine-drawn features never changed one atom. He still looked austere, almost savage; but deep behind those piercing eyes there was a smile lurking. Did his thin lips twitch ever so little, as he observed the vexation of the young fellows who desired so much, and worked so hard, to be just as he was? If he were amused, he showed no trace of it as he turned to them and beckoned with one slim finger.

"Fire Horse land here," he declared abruptly, and then stood to his full height, wrapped in his blanket, apparently regarding nothing in particular. "Come ashore and p'raps walk about; say for certain soon."

But for the moment he made no further movement. It seemed to content him, even to interest him, to watch his young pupils and see what they would do. Tom placed himself beside the man at once, and looked closely about him, while Dick stepped towards the edge of the bank as if he were a cat on hot bricks. He tip-toed over the ground, so as not to upset any spoor there might be.

"Well," he cried at last, "if this don't beat the band! Sure, if I ain't jiggered!"

"Fire Horse landed here?" cried Tom, almost incredulous, and yet unable to believe that Eagle could make a mistake.

The Indian nodded curtly. "Land here," he said calmly. "Then went to canoe again."

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"Gee, this do take it altogether!" observed Frank, scratching his head. "Say, Red Fox, can you see all he's saying?"

The second Indian smiled serenely. He was not quite such an austere person as Eagle, and showed his enjoyment of the position openly.

"Fire Horse come ashore right enough," he agreed. "Then go back again. Think I know why, only not very certain."

That brought Scoutmaster James and the Colonel about them, while Billy hung on the flank, listening with all his ears. Then they discussed the problem from every side, for here was work which it behoved the scouts to accomplish.

"We're not going to be beaten right off," said the Scoutmaster, his brows contracted. "Now, you fellows who have looked round say you have found nothing. Give Billy and myself a turn. If we spot anything we'll tell you, but we won't say what it is exactly. You shall try to find it for yourselves; the Indians, meanwhile, can keep silent."

Two pair of Indian eyes flashed their meaning at one another. Red Fox actually allowed himself to smile again, though Eagle looked, if anything, a trifle more severe. But there was that deep twinkle in his eyes, and our hero, observing it, laughed outright.

"What a fellow to keep a secret!" he said. "Looks as if wild horses couldn't drag it out of him, and as if torture wouldn't compel him to change that stern look."

But meanwhile Scoutmaster James and Billy were busy. They searched the bank closely, hovered here and there, and finally came back beaming.

"Got it!" exclaimed Billy, his eyes wide open with delight. "Fire Horse landed here, then went aboard again."

"Though how to give a reason for the movement is beyond me," declared Mr. James. "Now, hunt yourselves."

That put them all on their mettle, and very soon shouts came from the scouts who hitherto had been unsuccessful.

"Just shows how careful you have to be," said Dick. "Who'd have thought to look into the water when we've been staring at every inch of the bank? But there it is. He stepped out of the canoe into deep water, say up to his middle, and, wading ashore to that rock, came through a small bed of weeds, some of which are trampled beneath the water. You can see their flowering tops floating under the surface. Then on the rock there's some more of that ash. Reckon he sat down for a bit. Then he returned, making another path through the weeds. He didn't come any farther up the bank."

Eagle nodded at him. "Quite right," he said. "The white scouts do well. Many would have missed the signs even when asked to look for them. My brother believes he can say for what reason he came ashore."

The eyebrows went up ever so little, and he turned to Red Fox. But not for information, for the thin smile on his lips now seemed to tell his audience that he also had guessed. But how? What had stimulated their powers of deduction? It was Frank who attempted a solution, for his knowledge of the country and of the people helped him.

"Gee, I do believe I've got it!" he cried. "That old Fire Horse didn't come ashore only to sit on a rock and light his pipe. We know he went right back again, though we can't say how long he sat there. Seems to me long enough to smoke his pipe and finish it. He shook the ashes out on the rock. Wall,

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supposing he wanted more money? He'd kind of guessed that these two rascals we're after was mighty anxious to get ahead up the river. They were relying on him as a guide. He struck. Eh? Don't it look like it?"

All eyes went to the Indians, who for the moment made no movement. No doubt they found it a little difficult to follow his words, for he had spoken quickly.

"You mean he refused to go on unless they gave him higher wages," said the Colonel. "Well, it does indeed seem as if that were the reason. What does Red Fox say?"

"Right!" came the abrupt answer. "Know Fire Horse very well. He very clever, very anxious to get dollars. No need for him to come ashore here. They talked out in the river. He said he was tired and wanted to go home. Then he asked for more dollars. They refused. Fire Horse dropped into the water, waded to the rock, and smoked. 'You get along alone,' he said to them, perhaps. 'I got some dollars from you already. That enough. Now go back to Winnipeg, to the saloons.'"

Eagle once more allowed his thin lips to twitch.

"Not like that at all, the two white men," he said. "They want to make higher up the river. Got guns, but not used to camping out. Found Fire Horse very useful. Good cook, good guide—useful, yes, very."

Tom shut his eyes; he could imagine the whole scene vividly. He had already heard that Fire Horse was a rascal, much addicted to returning to Winnipeg, and saw that a man of his stamp, who had had dealings with many whites, would have been cunning enough to perceive quickly that this was not an ordinary hunting party. He would have noticed that he was guiding men who were most anxious to get away from their fellows.

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"In fact, he made use of what he merely guessed at," said our hero. "Saw that he was absolutely essential to Anderson and Raines, and promptly declined to go farther up the river unless he received more money. This fork is just the place the rascal would choose. They, of course, had to agree to his terms; most likely they can't even cook for themselves."

"He tired 'em out, any way," cried Dick. "Wall, that's settled, I guess. The thing to get to the bottom of now is the direction they've taken."

"But that will be more difficult. We can't settle it in a moment," declared Tom, staring into the water.

However, the two Indians seemed to have no hesitation. They advised that the whole party should embark, and promptly took the left branch of the river. It was the more direct one, for the stream flowing from the right came at a right angle to the junction. Indeed, though it was rather larger than the one into which the canoes were headed, it seemed from its direction to be merely a tributary of the main stream.

"Leads to the Lake of the Woods," said Frank, who happened to be paddling just in front of Tom. "This arm flows down from Lonely Lake, and receives the overflow of a chain of small lakes lying north of it. Gee! It beats me how them Indians can have decided that the fellows we are following paddled up this way.

It was a matter which, indeed, troubled many of the others. Imagine a group of scouts, whose sole aim and object was to become proficient, and who by now were legitimately entitled to consider that they knew something, following their noses blindly, simply because a couple of Indians told them it was the right course. Even Scoutmaster James was disconcerted.

"The thing may be perfectly right, and probably is

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so," he said with something like vexation in his voice; "but I declare I cannot see why the rascals we are supposed to be following should not actually have paddled up the other arm. Here are Red Fox and Eagle sitting like a couple of old crows, content and sure of themselves, and yet not deigning to tell us how it is they guess that these criminals have come this way."

The words, which were spoken in all friendship, did not fail to draw an answer. Eagle's eyes merely blinked; such a taciturn individual was not likely to be moved to answer if he had not the wish. A quick gleam came from his eyes: he favoured Tom with a stare which made our hero wriggle. For he could have sworn that there was amusement behind the deep-set eyes. However, Red Fox vouchsafed an explanation.

"Not need to bother," he said languidly. "White men pass along here with Fire Horse, make for Lonely Lake."

His mouth shut like a trap, and he left his hearers none the wiser.

"Wall," growled Dick, getting nettled, "of all the——"

"Why, I do believe I've dropped on it."

The tall figure of Frank suddenly raised itself some inches. He began to smile, and, catching Red Fox's eye, nodded towards the stream. "My," he shouted a moment later, "if only you chaps would use your eyes it'd be easy! Did them ruffians pass this way? Why, the thing's written clear before you."

Tom could almost have struck the young scout in his vexation, while there was something suspiciously like a nasty scowl on Dick's brow.

"Writer clear," he growled.

"If only we'd use our eyes," repeated Tom, his teeth clinching.

"And see what's laid out clear for you," roared Billy, his face suddenly expanding into a huge smile, for he, too, had hit upon the something which told the story of Raines's whereabouts and that of his companions.

In the end, when the matter came to be explained, the baffled scouts found that they had merely themselves to blame. The whole affair became so palpable that Tom had serious thoughts of kicking himself as a warning to others. For Anderson and his two comrades sent down a messenger every few minutes to inform those who were following that they were on the right track.

"Gee! I never!" exclaimed Dick. "So simple, too, when you come to think of it."

Red Fox grinned, Eagle's face changed perhaps the merest trifle, while Billy, in his exuberance, burst into a loud and irritating guffaw. It was so jolly to feel that he at least had succeeded in tracing the fugitives. And he was not even scared by the black looks about him.

"Dear boys," he said, endeavouring to repress a grin, "kindly observe that we float in water."

That brought a storm of protests. Dick looked unutterable threats and penalties. As for Scoutmaster James, he laughed heartily. He reflected that too much success is bad on occasion, for it may happen to produce inflated ideas of cleverness. He remembered that it is by mistakes, and consequent reflection, that one learns, not by an unbroken series of victories. He chuckled, feeling sure that this illustration could not but be of value to the patrol, and, in due course, when it came to be repeated, to the whole of the two Slimington troops. He smiled at Billy and egged him on.

"Hooray!" he shouted. "Well done, Billy! We float in water."

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"In flowing water, to be precise," continued the delighted scout.

"Shut up!" cried Tom, shaking a fist at him. But there was a smile on his face. Our hero was too sensible and too good-natured to be really angry.

"Which carries on its surface, half-submerged, as the reporters say, sufficient evidence of the path these villains followed. Gentlemen, I beg of you to show some sort of acumen. This is merely a case demanding ordinary powers of sense and observation."

"Sense and observation," growled Dick, moving restlessly, so much in fact that Red Fox scowled at him.

"Move like that and canoe swamp. Take in water. Sink. Drown everyone," he said.

"Perhaps," smiled Tom. "Though I fancy a ducking would do some of us good. Cool our brains, eh, Dick, if we've got any of 'em."

Even Dick Brown couldn't help but smile. He was a merry fellow at heart, but desperately keen to be successful. It irked him greatly to fail in some scouting duty, and perhaps too much success, as Scoutmaster James had said, was not altogether a good thing. It had made him a little careless, while the knowledge of such a thing made his fingers tingle; but deep down below all his keenness there was a wonderful fund of humour. He smiled. He laughed outright at Tom's words; and then he roared.

"You, ah—er—you speak for—er—er—yourself, dear boy?" he asked. "You venture to question whether you have such a commodity as brains. Oh—er—really—er—don't you know—why ask the—er—er—question? So unnecessary, ain't it?"

That brought a shout from the others, while Tom doubled a brawny fist and shook it at Dick. He flushed, too, under the tan which so many days' work in the open had brought to his fresh, young, open face—he

flushed at his comrade's words. Not so much at their actual meaning, but at the manner in which certain of them were emphasized. It reminded him of the days when he had not been a scout, when he had put on side, when grocers' sons, butchers' offspring, and other lads were, in his imagination, somewhat to be avoided, of a different cast, almost differently constructed. But now he had learned a great deal, amongst many things that grocers' sons, taking into consideration their home training, which may have been, and probably was, very different to his own, were for all that often excellent fellows, just as keen on their work as he could be, just as hard and persevering when it came to strenuous times, not a whit behind him or anyone else in their determination to follow the scout law, to honour King and country, to forward by every means in their power the prosperity of the glorious Empire to which they had the privilege to belong.

"Do grocers' sons and others talk in that stupid way?" he had asked himself time and again. "Do they indulge in rotten side, and go about with their heads in the air as if they were better than others? Do they buck about the school they go to because it is old and historic and expensive, more so perhaps than others? It's right, of course, for a chap to think his own school better than any other; but it's a rotten idea to suggest that because he may go to an excellent institution that therefore he, individually, is better than boys who happen to go to less-well-known academies."

We give his own words. "Rotten" was somewhat of a favourite, and though, perhaps, not very high sounding, it was extremely expressive, and had this huge advantage, that every fellow, young or old, understood it.

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But the two lads were meanwhile in the canoe, under the austere eye of Eagle. They were helping to paddle up a stream which the Indians declared had borne, but a short while before, the craft containing the two ruffians for whom they were searching. More than that, gall and wormwood to Dick and Tom and their unsuccessful comrades, about them was plain evidence telling that the miscreants had passed ahead, evidence which they had failed to see, but which Billy, the one-time tenderfoot, had perceived some while now. It was maddening to watch his elastic grin, his air of self-complaisance.

"Dear boys," he began again, seeing that Tom and Dick had quietened down, "it is just as I observed before. We float in water. We——"

"Say there," cried Frank, laughing at Billy's humour, "if I don't believe you're wrong. We float in a canoe. The signs we're looking for float in water true enough. I've seen 'em. It's easy as picking gooseberries."

And then Tom and Dick and the others discovered the evidence for which they were searching. How was it that Red Fox had stated that the miscreants had passed this way with such perfect assurance?

"Why, the reeds told 'em, to be sure," sang out Dick, bringing a hand bang down on his thigh, as if in punishment. "Wall, if we oughtn't to be kicked, you and me, Tom, and the others."

Down under the surface, rising sometimes, sometimes a foot or more deep, an occasional reed passed the canoes on its way down to Lake Winnipeg. The river bed itself was sown thick with similar reeds, and now and again the paddles stirred them up in shallower places, and cut some adrift. It was clearly a case where keen observation, and the ordinary powers of deduction, were required to elucidate what at first

seemed a difficulty. The blind or hasty scout was baffled, just as Tom and Dick had been; the trained hand, used to watching everywhere, and picking up the smallest crumbs of evidence, needed but half an eye to see those severed reeds. And promptly his powers of deduction came into action.

"In fact," smiled Billy in that aggravating way of his, "reeds don't cut themselves adrift, do they? They float about comfortably till some rascal comes along with a paddle. Then they go sailing down stream as evidence against him. Guess we're not so far from those fellows."

Eagle dropped a hand idly into the stream and grasped a severed reed as it passed. He drew it into the canoe and handled it as if it were of no great consequence. Then he passed it to his teeth, drove his paddle in again, and remained staring straight before him. But a flash passed through those deep-set eyes. Tom was sure of it. The Indian was thinking deeply; he was using his wits.

"Well?" asked our hero.

Eagle seemed not to have heard him. But a second or two later he opened his lips.

"Not far ahead, no," he said emphatically. "Quite close; see them before supper."

"But—how?" gasped Dick, his mouth wide open.

Eagle smiled; the keenness of the young scouts delighted him. "See here," he said, dropping his paddle and holding the reed in his palms. "That thing cut across by a sharp blow; most likely from a paddle. Look at the cut; quite clean and white—eh, that so?"

"Yes, and I suppose it proves the cut was done lately," interrupted Dick, "but——"

"If done day ago, cut not white—brown, very," said the Indian smoothly. "If fresh and white, and

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you not know when it was done, and want to make sure——”

“Yes?” the scouts demanded, straining their ears to listen.

“You use the teeth. Bite into him, like so.”

He illustrated his meaning by allowing his firm, beautifully regular teeth to meet in the reed. Instantly Tom stretched for a second reed which happened to be passing, gripped it, examined the cut end, with Dick closely watching him, and then sank his teeth into the stem.

“Well?” asked Dick.

“Say, you’ve got a grip with your teeth: what’s the argument?” asked Frank.

“Not over tasty, to judge by the face he’s pulling,” laughed Billy. “But what is it? That reed you’re biting has a fresh white cut. Good! How long ago did the paddle strike across it?”

It made them all laugh to watch Tom’s puzzled expression. He broke the reed up and passed the portions round; but all were baffled. Eagle watched their difficulty with suppressed amusement; his white teeth were unmasked for a moment. Did he wink at Red Fox?

“The ways of scouts are difficult,” he said. “Mayhap you have never had a similar test to this one. See, here is a reed I have picked from the river a moment ago. It has frayed its stem through against a stone, perhaps. See the cut; it is brown, discoloured and wrinkled. It is old, therefore. It may have been days in the water. Now, see, I bite it. Do the same yourselves.”

They fell to his meaning very quickly. It was one of those matters appearing very difficult at first, and so exasperatingly simple afterwards. This last reed was soft and pulpy, and soaked with water. The

fresher reeds were crisp. The pulp had not been washed or soaked out of them.

"So those fellows are somewhere near," said Tom, when the discussion had died down. "We shall be having to take some sort of precautions against them."

The words had hardly left his lips when a single report bellowed from the bank of the river some three hundred yards ahead. Fire spurted from a muzzle low down, near the water, while a bullet ripped through the thin sides of the first canoe, ricocheted on the surface, and then buried itself in the trunk of a giant tree.

Eagle was right: the rascals were nearer than the others had suspected.

CHAPTER XVIII

In the Line of Fire

Ping! phit! crash! A second bullet hummed above the canoe, and hardly had the thud of the missile on the opposite bank, and the report of the weapon, died down, when another leaden messenger winged its way in the direction of the scouts. Tom instantly felt a queer little fluttering about his wideawake hat. Was it a bee alighting there? No, something bigger and more powerful; for the whole hat had been bodily shifted round. He put up his hand, snatched the covering from his head, and regarded it with a wry smile on his lips.

"Shooting!" he exclaimed quietly, showing it to Dick. "They mean business, do those fellows."

He had hardly had time to shake the lock of severed hair from his hat when the Colonel's voice broke the silence.

"Into the bank," he shouted. "Get under cover at once; they'll be hitting some of us."

"I think," cried Tom dryly, "they've been near enough. Say, Dick, what about that rifle?"

But his chum needed no encouragement. It hardly required the snap of the first weapon to bring his own light rifle into his hand, for he had laid it at his feet in the canoe. As Tom spoke, the weapon went to Dick's shoulder, while the young fellow, who was kneeling, steadied himself against the low gunwale of the canoe and glanced along the sights.

Tom Stapleton

Ping! ping! Two shots rang out from amongst the trees higher up the river, while the bullets hummed over the heads of the travellers in the canoes, causing all involuntarily to duck—all save Tom and Dick. As for the latter, he never moved a muscle save the few necessary to bring his sights round. He fixed them on a dark object and pressed his trigger the same instant.

Bang! The report startled some of his comrades who had not been watching him, and brought a flush of surprise to faces which were already tense; but the next instant found the young fellows bubbling over with enthusiasm. For Dick's bullet had gone home. A sharp cry had come to their ears, and immediately afterwards a figure had started up from amongst the cover from which the miscreants had been firing.

"Just got a glimpse of something over there," said Dick, opening the breach of his weapon, and stuffing in a fresh cartridge. "Fired a foot below it; guess I put in one. Ain't he howling?"

Hews of pain indeed came from the enemy, then, as all looked, the figure which had suddenly appeared developed into that of a man, a short, thickset man, who stood poised on his feet, gripping one forearm and bending every now and again.

"Broken arm," said Tom shortly. "Hurts, no doubt. That's Raines."

"Fine shot!" exclaimed Eagle, his eyes and his speech showing open enthusiasm for the first time.

"But paddle."

"Yes, paddle for your lives," urged the Colonel. "Dick, send them another; there can be no half measures here. How I wish that I had armed the whole party!"

But Dick Brown was a host in himself. He jerked his weapon to his shoulder again, and this time levelled

his sights on a spot to the left of Raines, where he thought one of the rifles had been fired. Ping! The shot was followed with keen enthusiasm. The scouts seemed to have forgotten their danger. They did not even duck when another report bellowed from the cover, and a ball whistled between the canoes. Ah! There was a commotion over there. Dick's shot had been followed by a sudden movement. Brambles and undergrowth lurched to one side as if struck by a strong gust. A head appeared, adorned with feathers, and at once sank down again. As for Raines, the thought of further punishment quickly drove him out of sight; he flopped into the bushes.

"Think another hit that time. Fire Horse get in way of bullet," said Eagle, his eyes flashing, as if he were suddenly seized with the fever of battle. "Hit him; but not howl, same as other man."

There was a depth of scorn in his words. His lips closed, the eyebrows contracted. No one could have conveyed their opinion of the miscreant Raines so tersely or so concisely. But all the while the Indian drove his paddle deeply, while the canoe, followed by its fellow, shot towards the bank. A huge tree which had become uprooted in some gale, and had fallen into the water, offered a very friendly shelter to the scouts, and both canoes were quickly brought up behind it.

"Of course we can't stay here," said Scoutmaster James. "Listen: we get ashore and race into cover. There must be no open attack on those men. All we have to do for the present is to keep them within easy reach. If they move on, so will we; if they stop, we will stop. Who knows, the opportunity of disarming them may come at any moment?"

It was exciting work getting under cover. One by one the scouts dashed ashore, each armed with his staff. The Colonel followed, while Dick Brown and Tom, as

cool as icicles, sat in one of the canoes, taking turns with the rifle.

"Just to keep 'em from getting too bold and forward," said the latter, as he shot an empty cartridge from the breech and handed the weapon back to its owner. "Now, what do we do?"

That was the question. It brought the elders with their heads close together, while the scouts crowded round. There was now no fear of their being seen or hit, for they were behind the thickest cover, and it was obvious that the miscreants had lost trace of them for the moment.

"Now," began the Colonel, as leader of the expedition, "we have a very knotty point to decide. We have located these men. It remains for us to arrest them; but that is an altogether different matter."

He looked round the circle slowly, his brows knitted, his right hand unconsciously closing firmer round the stock of his revolver.

"An altogether different matter," he said again. "I take it that all are agreed that the arrest is a matter of duty?"

"Certainly," exclaimed Scoutmaster James promptly. "In the absence of police it is undoubtedly our duty, the duty of any law-abiding citizen. We could not venture back to the settlements with a tale of failure."

Of course not; a glance at the eager faces of the scouts proved the truth of his words incontestably. Kinchin closed his fist and shook it. He was one of those quiet young fellows who speak seldom, but who are none the less keen and full of life. One had to watch him closely to follow his emotions.

"It is our duty," he said, "whatever the cost."

"Then the first thing is to seek advice," remarked Scoutmaster James. "Let us consult Eagle and Red Fox."

They turned to the two stalcal Indians and asked for their advice; but it was some little while before they obtained it. Neither of these two silent, thoughtful men was inclined to speak on the spur of the moment.

"Difficult," observed Red Fox at last. "If this was a redskin war, and braves were out on the trail, there would be no need to wait or to think. We should track those men, fall upon them, and kill them with the tomahawk. But we are not on the warpath. Eagle and I have no weapons save our knives, while there are lads with us. For us the danger is nothing," he smiled ever so little at the bare thought that it could be imagined that he or Eagle or the other two adults could be afraid, "for these lads it is great."

"Yet the necessity to face danger means the making of men," said Eagle, interrupting him. "Were these lads to shrink from the task before us because they are young they would fall in their own estimation, in that also of their comrades of a similar age. They have sat still under the bullets of the enemy. They will work well and fight well if there be need. I counsel that we surround the enemy, locate their exact position, and call upon them to surrender. If they refuse——"

"Yes?" asked the Colonel, his face eager and anxious.

"We creep in upon them at night. We fall upon them and take them."

"But—wait." It was Tom who had interrupted. He took a pace into the centre of the group and looked keenly into Eagle's face.

"You spoke," said the Indian. "The young brave has something to say to which we should listen. Has he not already had dealings with these men, and borne himself as he should do? Speak on; we wait."

"Supposing they don't allow you to creep in and surround them," Tom blurted out, an idea having come suddenly to him. "Supposing they are badly scared

and slip into their canoe. Then the chase begins again. We should not be able to surround them; they would slip away and leave us none the wiser perhaps."

It was by no means an idle suggestion. It was clear at once that both Eagle and Red Fox regarded it as having weight. The former almost shut his eyes as he considered the matter, while Red Fox stepped to the edge of the cover and looked up the river. Then he came back again and stood regarding our hero.

"You are right," he said. "While there is a canoe to embark in they will not allow us to surround them. Had the white men been alone it would have been different; but Fire Horse is with them. His wits are not as sharp as they used to be, it is true, still he is an Indian."

That meant a great deal to the man who spoke, while the sense of his last words hardly needed to be explained to the scouts. Did they not fully understand that by "Indian" Red Fox meant a man trained to the forest and the lake, a scout ever on the lookout for spoor, for strange sights, for the merest trifles, for sounds which to the average individual mean nothing, but which to the initiated convey a thousand things? Fire Horse was an Indian when all was said and done, only his fondness for saloons and the liquor sold in them had dulled his wits and robbed him of some of his manhood, as it does inevitably in every similar case.

"And this young friend would suggest a means to thwart our enemies, to allow us to gather round them and hem them in," said Eagle, his half-closed eyes fixed on Tom. "With us it is a bold youth who speaks before his elders, and with you white people also, no doubt. But there are times when a youth may speak, knowing he has weight in his words. Let us hear what our friend has to say."

At another time Tom would have been abashed. But he needed not the reminder of that gash in his hat to show him that Raines and his comrades were dangerous people, and that this was no ordinary matter. It was not a time for hanging back when he felt that he had something of importance to suggest, and straightway he blurted out the idea which had been forming in his head.

"We're going to capture those fellows," he said stubbornly. "Well now, to do that we have to make escape impossible. If only we can confine Raines and Anderson to the land, we have them, sooner or later, for we can keep on following till we tire them out. There is that canoe; I am going to sneak it away from them.

"But—but how?" asked the Colonel, taken aback by the suggestion.

"By creeping along the bank till I am close enough. Of course they'll pot at me if I show up much; but you can make matters easy. Supposing we spread out in couples. Those away in the wood need not be too careful of making a noise; in fact, they may make as much as they like. That draws the attention of the enemy away from the water. Eh? What?"

"Supposing they see you!" demanded the Colonel, doubtful as to the expediency of such a move.

"I take care to keep an eye in that direction," came in Dick. "I pepper them with my rifle."

"It is a wise plan; we should follow it," said Eagle shortly, tossing aside his blanket.

Red Fox nodded. "He will succeed," he declared.

"Let us spread out in the forest."

It took little time to make their preparations, so that very soon the scouts were parted and were crawling through the undergrowth by couples. Dick could see them from the place where he and Tom sat hidden.

The sounds came plainly to their ears, and after a while to the ears of the enemy also. For a head was cautiously raised from the undergrowth in which Raines and his friends had taken cover, while, a moment or two later, the rascal Anderson stood to his full height, pointing into the forest. Instantly Dick's rifle went to his shoulder.

"Steady!" whispered Tom, laying a hand on his sleeve. "Don't fire. If you do they'll guess there are some of us still down here. Keep your bullet in case of emergencies. Ah! look at them; getting nervous, I do believe; they've crept farther into the forest."

Had Dick wished to do so he could have shot either of the three men with the greatest ease. But Tom was right, a sound from that direction would have disturbed the men and would have kept them within sight of their canoe. Besides, there was something else which helped to restrain his hand.

"Don't like potting at men like that when they ain't exactly fighting," he said. "Not quite cricket. Eh?"

Tom nodded; he was watching the three figures. "I'm going," he whispered. "Keep an eye out for them. If they see me I shall dodge into cover. So long!"

He grinned at his friend, and then wormed his way into the cover. Dick followed his track as long as waving fern stems would allow him. Then he lost all trace of his friend.

"My," he declared with some enthusiasm, "he's as good as an Indian! No one could say where he is at the moment."

Tom was indeed quite a capable scout, and had already earned great praise from Eagle and his comrade. He was one of those lads who took care to

listen to advice when it was given, and followed the ways of those who were expert in scouting with the greatest thoroughness. Besides, he had a fund of common sense which helped him wonderfully. On this occasion he had need of the greatest caution, and consequently he never ventured a step forward till he was sure that his path was clear. His hand went out with the regularity of a machine, and sticks and fallen leaves were gently placed aside. The long, thin bough of a bramble which crossed his path was slowly pulled towards him and tucked into a neighbour.

"Just the thing to give me away if I weren't extra careful," he thought. "It would catch in my clothes and make the whole bramble bush shake. Raines wouldn't spot it, perhaps, but Fire Horse would. Wonder if I shall manage the job?"

Slowly and steadily he advanced, till, after ten minutes, he was within a stone's throw of the spot where the canoe had been run ashore. He could see a portion of it now, and lay down for a while to stare into the cover. But nothing betrayed the presence of the enemy. The only sounds were those coming from his own comrades, the sharp crackle of dried leaves sounding wonderfully clear in the general stillness and travelling a great distance, and the report-like fractures of fallen twigs.

Ah! There was another sound. A twig broke a little way off behind a leafy covering. Tom flattened himself instantly.

"Raines," he told himself as the figure of his enemy appeared, "and the other rascal. They look scared; I think we shall have them."

The faces of the two villains were peering between the leaves, and each told its tale unmistakably. Fear was written on the features, while there was a startled glare about the eyes which spoke of desperation.

Crack! A crisp report from the heart of the forest suddenly caused them to swerve round again, and Tom watched them creeping farther away into the cover. But of Fire Horse he saw nothing.

"Time to get ahead," he told himself. "I think I might almost make a run for it."

He knelt up ever so gently, cast his eyes over his shoulder towards the canoe, and was in the act of rising from his knees when something brought him to a standstill. A man had just crawled into a tiny open space in front of him, and the glimpse he got told him it was Fire Horse. For a moment Tom sat crouched, watching the man as if he were spellbound. There was something snake-like in the Indian's movements, something which fascinated our hero and held him motionless. For Fire Horse hardly seemed to move an arm or leg, and yet he slid along over the ground. Not a sound did he make, save for his deep breathing, proving that he was not in the best of condition. Indeed here was a sure sign of what Red Fox had mentioned. The saloons of Winnipeg, and the spirit this Indian was won't to drink there, had already produced their effect. Fire Horse could not forget his early training; his ancient cunning remained with him by force of habit. But the effort told upon him now as it had never done before. What had once been child's play was now a labour.

"Coming directly towards me; this is getting serious," thought Tom.

He would have moved aside, but instinct told him that the action would be futile. Fire Horse was sure to detect it; then Tom braced his limbs for the inevitable encounter. Closing his fists, he fixed his eye on the knife which the man bore in his belt, and made preparations to relieve him of it.

"I'll make a dive for it and shy it away," he told



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A DESPERATE STRUGGLE

himself. "After that we shall be on more even terms. Ah, he's looking towards the forest! Perhaps he'll miss me."

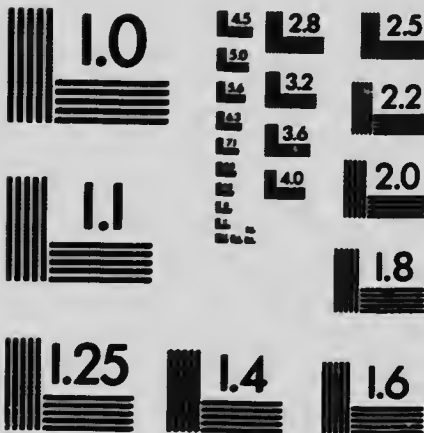
It was true that Fire Horse had turned a little, hearing sounds from the cover. But in a second he was worming his way along his old path, unconscious of the fact that a few moments would bring him face to face with one of the pursuers. That someone might be advancing in that direction had occurred to the Indian; but he was not prepared for the surprise that Tom had in store for him. It happened, therefore, that our hero was able to grip the man's dagger just as the bracken between them parted, and in a trice he had flung it aside. Then came a hoarse grunt, the sharp indrawing of a breath, and swiftly afterwards a desperate struggle. They threw themselves at one another, the Indian intent on choking his enemy, while Tom made use of scientific training. He struck out with both fists in quick succession, sending the Indian reeling backwards. But the effort cost him something; his feet slipped on the rotting bracken and he fell heavily, the man he had struck flinging himself savagely upon him. Then began a tussle which brought Dick Brown's heart to his mouth; for the two combatants broke away for the space of a few seconds, regained their feet, and promptly closed with one another. They staggered this way and that, not a sound escaping them, each battling for the mastery. As for Tom, he felt more than once that his back would be broken, so strong was the Indian's grip. Then it dawned upon him that his enemy was preparing for some particular movement.

"Going to press me over his knee and bend me double," he thought as he struggled desperately. "I'll see how I can prevent him."



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Tom Stapleton

With a heave he lifted the Indian from his feet and endeavoured to fling him sideways. But once more the man regained his footing. Then Tom loosened his own hold of his adversary.

"Dog!" he heard the Indian gasp, for the man was badly winded. "I have broken your strength. Now I will kill you surely."

The two arms which felt so like steel bands about our hero suddenly relaxed their grip, while the Indian prepared to swing Tom's body into another position. He bent to grip his knees, and had Tom allowed him to do so no doubt the contest would have been ended for him. But he was watching for the movement. Swift as a flash he brought his knee up into the Indian's face, sending his head backwards. Then he seized him in his arms, pressing his hands close to his sides so that he could not use them.

"Hooray! Hold him! Break him! Shy him into the river!"

Dick bellowed the words at the top of his voice, and stood exposed in the cover, eagerly watching the contest. Indeed he was on the point of dashing forward to help his friend, when two figures burst from the forest. They were Raines and Anderson, the former with one arm swinging useless, but with the barrel of his rifle gripped in the other. Instantly Dick swept his little weapon to his shoulder, and, taking a swift aim, pressed the trigger. Ping! Raines stopped short, swung round, and dived into the cover; but Anderson remained where he was. He stood a moment reeling from side to side, and then, throwing his hands above his head, dropped into the bracken.

Meanwhile Tom and the Indian continued their struggle. Frantically his antagonist endeavoured to free his arms; but our hero held to him manfully. They staggered from side to side and almost toppled

over on several occasions. Then they seemed suddenly to lose their balance. They fell with a crash, rolled several yards, and then went souse into the water.

Dick shouted and raced towards the spot as fast as he was able. But when he reached it there was not a sign of either. Only the canoe appeared, half out of the water, its stern bobbing gently after the commotion.

CHAPTER XIX

Raines Defies his Pursuers

IF Scoutmaster James and his patrol thought to capture Raines with ease, now that he was left alone to battle against them, they were destined to be much disappointed; for the villain, in spite of a fractured arm, resisted their approach desperately. Grovelling in the bracken and undergrowth he fired continuously into the forest, and, worse than all, he turned his attention on Dick Brown. The latter had raced to the river bank, and had searched in vain for his comrade. But there was no sign of Tom, and though Dick persevered, in spite of bullets, he was driven to take cover.

"I'll shoot him the first glimpse I get of the ruffian," he told himself angrily, for the moments were fleeting, and Tom required his aid. "There's one for him, and there's number two."

He could see the dull flashes of Raines's rifle, and put his sights on them. The result surpassed his expectations; Raines changed his position, and a moment after the sharp crack of his weapon sounded from a different point farther in the cover.

"Then I'll move," said Dick. "There's the canoe: I'll race for it."

He went off at the double, and quickly reached the spot where the canoe which belonged to the miscreants they had been following was bobbing half in and half out of the water. Dick dropped his rifle into it,

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pushed the craft out, and stepped in promptly. Ping! Phit! A bullet struck the water just as his toes reached the bottom of the boat, and, ricocheting along the surface, struck the opposite bank heavily. Instantly the young fellow gripped a paddle and sent the canoe shooting out from the bank. Bang! A louder report sounded, showing that Raines had again returned towards the river. Dick dropped the paddle across his knees and lifted the rifle.

"He'll show himself in a jiffy," he thought. "Then I'll send him another bullet to make him careful."

But the rascal had all the advantage. Dick was out in the open, while Raines was well under cover. There came another report, and a resounding thud which made Dick Brown wince ever so little. He looked at the blade of his paddle, and saw that there was a neat little hole drilled through it. Then his rifle flew to his shoulder, for the rascal in the cover had become a little careless. Dick pressed the trigger swiftly, and once more heard that howl of pain. Raines disappeared like a rabbit.

"Now for Tom," thought Dick. "What can have happened to him?"

He might well ask the question, for some three minutes or more had elapsed since the two disappeared beneath the surface of the water. He looked to right and left, and up and down the river. Then suddenly he gave a start. For two figures lay on the edge of the water within ten feet of him, their feet still in the river. In went the paddle; Dick sent the boat swishing towards them.

"Hurt? All right, Tom?" he asked eagerly, leaping into the water and wading towards his friend. Tom moved his head, then shook it with slight effort. He was resting on one elbow, and was gasping heavily for breath. The other hand gripped his late antagonist;

not because he had need to fear a further struggle, but simply because it was with that hand he had dragged him from the water.

"Gee!" cried Dick, bending over them. "He's dead; you've killed him. How?"

Tom shook his head with greater vigour now and struggled to speak.

"Not dead, I think," he gasped. "We had a terrible tussle. I managed to shy his dagger aside, and that left us even. He's soft; I hammered him at first, and then locked his arms. When we fell into the water he bumped his head against a rock. That finished the matter for him. I dragged him up here. It was a near thing, Dick."

It had, indeed, been a near thing for both Tom and the Indian, and if the truth had but been known the latter owed his life to the youth whom he would willingly have killed a little while before. For the blow on his head had stunned him, and it was only with the greatest effort that Tom had been able to drag him clear of the water. It was no wonder that he was exhausted after the struggle.

"You lie still a bit," said Dick, taking in the situation, and proceeding to pull the canoe on to the bank. "I'll keep under cover here, and pepper that beggar. Anderson is down; I hit him with a bullet. So Raines is alone, and I've managed to hit him a second time."

The news seemed to do Tom good, and very soon he was sitting up and breathing more easily. As to Fire Horse, the Indian lay like a log, but his stertorous breathing told them plainly that he was living.

"Two down," said Tom at length. "Then we'll make a quick end of the matter. I'll tell you what it is, Dick; this quarrel is mine, not yours or the others'. I'm going to rush that fellow before he can do more mischief. I don't care a rap for his rifle; these last

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few minutes I seemed to have escaped so much that nothing matters."

There was a stern look in his eyes; Tom waved away Dick's expressions of disapproval impatiently.

"I'm going for him," he said again. "It's no use trying to thwart me."

"Then I'm coming too," was the prompt answer. "You say that this is your quarrel. Well, I happen to think otherwise. It's mine; that chap fired at me just now and nearly bagged me. If that isn't enough to make a fellow feel that he has a right to say something in this matter, then what is, eh?"

Tom grinned; he was feeling much more like himself now, and was almost ready for another tussle. He stretched out a hand and grasped his friend's. "My word!" he smiled. "You are a fighter. I was reckoning that I had a real right because of that bullet which plugged right through my hat. But he's fired at you, so of course you have a share in the matter. Let's discuss things; but, first, we'll pop Fire Horse in the canoe, and take him back to our own cover."

They lifted the form of the Indian into the canoe, and paddled down stream till they came to the fallen maple, behind which their own crafts rested. A face peeped out at them from the brambles, and in a trice Kinchin was helping them to unload their burden. Then Red Fox and Eagle put in an appearance. The latter gave a deep grunt of approval on seeing Tom.

"Tell me all about it," he asked, seating himself on the ground. "I saw the struggle. I feared that Fire Horse would succeed in killing you. Ten years ago, when he was a younger man, and the saloons had not called so strongly to him, he would surely have succeeded, for you are not yet come to your full size and strength. There is an Indian trick he would have

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practised. He would have drawn you across his knee and bent your back till it broke asunder."

Tom made a grimace. There was even now in the hollow of his back a strange sensation, while later on Dick examined the part and found it blue with bruises.

"He tried it, Eagle," he said. "But I was too much for him,"

Then he described how he had snatched the man's dagger, and how the contest had ended.

Eagle gave something very like an amused chuckle. The corners of his expressive mouth drooped ever so little, while the eyebrows were elevated, as much as to express the fact that here was something beyond his comprehension.

"A white man is always like that," he said softly. "He wars with another and strives to kill him. Then, suddenly finding this adversary, who would have taken his life, helpless and drowning, he risks his own to save that of the enemy. It passes the comprehension of an Indian. But you did well. Had you not plucked the knife from him——"

Up went the eyebrows again in a significant manner. Eagle actually smiled, as if he were delighted that matters had turned out so fortunately. Indeed, there was no doubt that he was overjoyed to find our hero safe and sound after such a contest.

"But this one villain still remains," he began again a little later. "Two are finished with and as good as dead, for they can no longer harm us. The third is worse than the others placed together. He begins to behave like a madman."

"Then the sooner he is captured the better," declared Tom. "I am going to stalk him. I shall creep close up, wait till he has fired and emptied his weapons, and then go for him as hard as I can. Hammer and tongs, Dick?"

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His face was flushed as he spoke. Dick grinned across at him, and took up his rifle.

"Ready," he said. "But hadn't you better take a weapon? Why not borrow the Colonel's?"

The suggestion seemed a good one, and that gallant officer, putting in an appearance at the moment, promptly handed over his shooter.

"Raines has gone farther into the forest," he reported. "I am wondering how far it runs. He may be breaking out into the open."

Red Fox shook his head vigorously. "Not do that," he said. "He knows he is safer under the cover. He believes that by keeping still, perhaps, he can throw us off the scent. He will not leave the forest; it is big enough to shelter him for some time, unless we are lucky enough to surround him."

"Then that is precisely what we must set about doing. I'll call in the scouts."

There was a conference between the leaders of the little band lasting some few minutes. Then Red Fox went off with Billy, with the intention of striking out for the far verge of the forest, which the Indian told them extended for perhaps a mile. Kinchin followed them, with Frank beside him, while Jack and the Colonel joined forces, and had soon disappeared amidst the bracken and bushes. Dick and Tom and Eagle were left to command the river side, while the two lads were to follow out their purpose. They were to creep in upon the rascal hidden in amongst the trees, and were to attempt to rush him.

"With care and caution you will succeed," said Eagle, as they sat on the bank, waiting to give those who had gone elsewhere time to get to the far side of the forest. "But do not fire at him; make not so much as a sound. Let him hear and give attention to the others."

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"And so get nearer and nearer without his guessing," answered Tom. "We will do as you advise, Eagle. But if you hear a shout, come quickly. Dick and I ought easily to be able to take the fellow. But then, we might not. He's a desperate ruffian, and as strong as a horse; even with a broken arm he will be dangerous."

If either of the two lads could have seen the desperado at that moment they would have agreed that he was still capable of mischief, for Raines guessed that he was cornered, and that fact alone was sufficient to transform him. He seemed to have become half-crazy. His eyes were starting from his head, his nostrils agape, while his lips twitched incessantly. Then all his senses seemed to have become more acute; he heard everything, even the far-off sound of a breaking twig. As to his injuries, they were not by any means as severe as Tom imagined. True, he had received one ball in the arm, and a bone had been fractured; but, in spite of that, he could still use the hand, and, now that the pain was becoming deadened, found that he had some strength left in the injured limb. The second wound had merely damaged the muscles of his shoulder. It was barely more than skin deep, and the howl he had given vent to was prompted more by excitement and fear of the consequences than by the injury itself. In any case he was determined to keep his would-be captors at a distance, and for that reason, having discovered a huge, hollow tree, he took shelter just outside it.

Crash! Away in the distance he heard movement amidst the bracken, and at once his hand went to his rifle. The weapon rested at his shoulder a moment later, and then was slowly lowered.

"I should be a fool," he told himself. "Them fellers has been back to their canoes to talk it over,

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and have parted again. If I fire I let 'em know where I've got to. I'll stay as still as a mouse, and shoot only when I can easily see 'em and can be certain of killing. Killing! Yes, if the chance comes, I'll put a bullet into every one of 'em. As for that young fellow what's been the cause of all this trouble, I'll break his head in if only I can get near him."

A fierce scowl came across his face, while his hand gripped the rifle firmly. Raines stood up, his head bent forward, all his senses engaged in listening. And as he stood there, the memory of our hero, the thought of what he, Raines, would do to him if only he could accost him, took the ruffian's thoughts back to those days when he was at Slimington. He growled at the memory of his beating. An oath escaped him when he touched on the affair of the post cart, while his face, never remarkable for being gentle or handsome, became perfectly villainous when his mind returned to that eventful tracking, to the day when Tom Stapleton and Dick Brown followed himself and Franklin.

"Can't make out how they did it," he told himself, not for the first time. "We'd cleared out every nail in our boots, had climbed trees and crossed our tracks with lots of others. I knew it was tracks as would tell against us, 'cos it's them they're trained to follow. But blessed if me and Franklin ever thought they'd cop us in that stable. If only both of 'em had been left there to burn."

No doubt such an event would have given the wretch the utmost pleasure. Often and often, indeed, this rascal had bemoaned the fact that his relentless pursuers had not come to a painful end on that occasion. If he could have arranged it he would have locked them into the stable and so ensured their deaths; but they had escaped. Raines ground his teeth at the recollection. Then, of a sudden, his brow wrinkled; a

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thoughtful look swept into his eyes. The head, which had been bent forward in the attitude of listening, became sunk deeper and deeper on his breast. Slowly he turned and looked about him, then a cunning smile wreathed his twitching lips. Raines laid his rifle down at the foot of the tree and proceeded to search about him. Gradually he gathered a mass of fallen leaves, and heaped them within the hollow trunk, as if he were preparing a bed in which to sleep.

Meanwhile Tom and Dick had not been idle. Leaving Eagle crouching not far from the canoes, they slipped off into the bracken, and slowly moved towards the heart of the forest. Five minutes later they came to a halt and put their heads close together.

"Not a sound to tell where he's got to," whispered our hero, his lips close to Dick's ear. "Don't imagine that shot killed him, do you?"

"Kill him! You should have heard his howling! Not much chance of it," came the answer. "He's lying up in some bit of bracken, playing the game of hide-and-seek. He's seen that it is best to stay absolutely still, leaving us to move. Of course he can hear our fellows."

There was little doubt as to the truth of the last statement, for every now and again a gentle rustle came to their ears, or the sharp report of a breaking twig. Never before had Tom believed it possible for the simple fracture of a tiny piece of wood to create so much sound. But then his experience of forests had not been great. He had imagined that trees and bracken would dull the sounds, whereas they operated in the opposite manner. The forest giants, the undergrowth, the scrub, which, when massed together made the forest, opposed a barrier to outside sounds. They shut in a mass of air, enclosed as if within prison walls,

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and cut it off from outside interference to such a degree that a deadly silence pervaded the forest. Through that the merest whisper was heard. The veriest rustle became a startling noise, travelling far through the silence.

"Hear 'em," said Tom, indignation in his voice. "I should think so indeed. Just fancy scouts making such a clatter."

"They're moving fast and can't help it," explained Dick. "It's different with us; we're creeping slow, and choose our path, and clear it. Raines don't hear a whisper from this direction. What'll you do? It's hard to say what's become of him."

"Find the man Anderson; then follow traces," said Tom shortly. "Come along."

He raised his head for the fraction of a second so as to make sure of his surroundings. Then he wormed his way through the undergrowth towards the spot where the miscreants had taken up their station at the commencement of the attack. Some minutes later the two came upon the body of Anderson. The man was dead. He lay on his face without so much as a movement.

"Kind of makes a fellow feel funny," whispered Dick, looking furtively at their late enemy. "He asked for it."

Tom nodded curtly. It gave him a queer, chilly feeling down the back to think that the man lying there had been his father's half-brother, the one who had conspired against himself and had attempted to take his life. Then he looked at Dick. The ruddy features of his chum were blanched; it was the first time that Dick had had occasion to look upon similar work of his own doing. He had never laid a violent hand on anyone before.

"He asked for it," he said again lamely, as if by

way of excuse. "He sent a bullet within an inch of my body."

"And now that you've killed him you're going to have a nightmare," answered Tom, smiling serenely. "Dick, ain't you just a donkey! Of course he tried to kill you, and very naturally you had to defend your life. Besides, it wasn't your safety alone, it was that of the whole party. You were doing a duty. What's the scout law say?"

That cured Dick of any morbid feelings he might still have been disposed to indulge in. He smiled back at Tom, took his eyes from the body, and stared into the forest.

"Wall?" he asked, far more cheerfully.

"We have found their trace; we have only to follow it."

Without more ado Tom led the way forward, and was very soon following the spoor left by one man alone. Raines's tracks were as conspicuous as possible, so that the scouts could have followed them at a run. But that would have brought the attention of that individual to them. In consequence they stole along softly, waiting to listen every now and again, and at length coming to an abrupt halt.

"Somewhere near," whispered Tom. "I hear him."

"Guess he ain't ten yards away," came from his companion. "Hidden in that bracken, eh? See anything of him?"

Tom knelt up cautiously, and raised his head from behind a mass of bracken and bramble. He looked into a space comparatively free from trees, though almost in the exact centre there was one giant, dwarfed and stunted, but of enormous girth, and split in several directions. He was in the act of wondering whether the villain was sheltering on the far side,

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when a splash of flame suddenly spurted from one of the narrow slits he had already observed. There came a deafening report, and almost instantly a groan and a gentle movement beside him. Down dropped his head at once. He looked over his shoulder, to discover Dick spread flat on his face, his head buried in the bracken. And then there came from the far distance other sounds, the noise of men advancing through the forest. But for the moment Dick required his attention. He crept to his side and turned him over.

"George!" he whispered, smiling, for Dick's eyes were open. "Thought you were killed. You groaned, and dropped like a log. Are you hit? Where? Tell me."

But for the moment his friend could only smile back at him. He was struggling to get his breath and speak.

"Gee!" he cried at last, gasping. "That was a near one. See here. The bullet struck the stock of my rifle as I carried it before me. It drove it back against my chest and smashed the wood to atoms. There's nothing worse, only I'd have liked to have the weapon. Where is he?"

It was a huge relief to Tom to hear that his chum was not wounded. He inspected the shattered stock of the rifle, and then turned his attention to the ruffian hiding in the huge tree before him.

"He's got into a hollow tree," he reported. "I'll see whether a bullet won't drive him out of it."

He kneeled up once more, dropped swiftly, and, leading Dick, set off to the right.

"Knew where we were, and was just waiting to get another sight of us," he explained. "Now, we've a tree in front of us. I'll try a snap at him."

This time he had more confidence, for the tree gave

ample shelter. Tom kneeled up, took a careful aim, and pulled the trigger. The crash of the bullet against the oak came clearly to them. As for Raines, it startled him considerably, for the leaden messenger pierced the trunk and passed through the hollow close to him. Instantly he peered through one of the slits, but failed to perceive anything. And then there came to his ears those sounds of advancing people.

"Surrounded!" he told himself desperately. "Caught in a net, with those young imps behind, and between me and the river. I'll roast 'em out. I'll burn willingly to escape them."

That same cunning smile swept across his face. He stooped, struck a match, and deliberately applied it to the bracken. Then he fell back into the hollow, for a burst of flame almost enveloped him. As for the bracken, it was as dry as tinder at this period, and flared fiercely. Indeed the fire spread with amazing rapidity. Almost before he could believe it possible it had swept across the circle in which the tree stood, and had ignited other portions of the forest. Then it was caught by an eddy wind, and came surging back till Tom and Dick were forced to creep away from their position.

"Run!" said the former at length. "That chap's started a bonfire which will require no end of quenching."

"Fire!" bellowed Dick, standing to his full height and shouting the words into the forest. "Make for the canoes. Quick! There's not a moment to lose! You'll be cut off if you don't run!"

The two turned for one instant before they took to their heels, for a shout had come from the direction in which Raines had taken up his position. They saw him some few feet from the tree, standing in the open, with flames seeming to play about him. He called

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to the two lads jeeringly, lifted his rifle, and sent a bullet hissing past them.

"A parting shot to warn you," he shouted. "Get back to your mothers and to the scouts at Slimington!"

CHAPTER XX

Home to the Slimington Scouts

TOM STAPLETON and his chum Dick Brown took to their heels once the fire had been started in the forest, and raced towards the spot where the canoes had been pulled ashore. They were followed by another rifle shot, Raines's bullet tearing through the bracken close beside them. But they hardly noticed the narrow escape they had had, for there were other matters to engage their attention.

"Got to be extra quick," gasped Dick. "I've seen these forests burn. The fire runs along as quick as a horse can gallop, particularly at this season. Let's shout. Some of our fellows may not think it necessary to hurry."

They stopped for a moment to shout their warning, and then ran to the canoes. Eagle had already launched them, and sat in the bows of one ready to paddle.

"Little time yet," he said. "Stay here and wait. Red Fox run round, if the fire too big, and escape on the far side of the forest. Who made the fire?"

Tom told him promptly. "We were getting ready to rush him, and I had sent a bullet into the tree within which he was hiding. I fancy he knew he was almost surrounded, and, I suppose, hopes to escape by burning the place. If he don't take care he'll be roasted in his own oven."

"He will gain the open, where we shall have to

follow," answered Eagle; "but he will not be a free man for long. He is wounded. Even with a small wound a man is weakened. He will not go far; tomorrow he will be taken."

Evidently Eagle considered that Raines had done the only thing possible under the circumstances. Indeed, if the mind of this silent Indian could have been read openly, there was quite an amount of admiration there for the villain. For Indians, even in these days of some education, do not always think as do white men. It was natural to Eagle to look upon a man according to the powers of cunning he displayed, and here was an example which the stern warrior would himself have copied had he been in a similar situation.

"I have known a desperate man, surrounded by braves, escape in a manner almost similar," he remarked. "He fired the woods, thereby risking his own life, as this man does. It happened that the wind was strong that day, and blowing in the faces of the braves. It required all their effort to make good their escape; but here come some of our brothers."

"Kinchin and Frank!" exclaimed Tom, seeing them come running through the trees. "Hi!" he shouted. "Seen anything of the others?"

"Coming close behind," replied Kinchin, dropping into the canoe and blowing heavily. "The fire seemed to be sweeping in our direction, but suddenly the wind changed. The flames are moving along the river."

By now dense columns of smoke were ascending, for in parts the bracken was damp, and did not burn so easily. But elsewhere it was as dry as tinder, so that huge red tongues of flame burst from the smoke in all directions, sweeping sparks and whirling leaves with them.

"Best push out into the water," said Eagle a little

later. "Getting hot here. We can paddle in when our friends reach the river."

It was, in fact, already so hot that a longer stay beside the fallen maple became almost impossible. Then, too, as if to persuade them of their danger, flames swept right down to the bank near the place where Anderson and his fellows had first fired upon Tom and his comrades. Trees, burned at the foot, came toppling into the water, while showers of hot sparks and dense columns of smoke billowed out over the river.

"Canoe ahoy! We'll dive in. Stay where you are."

Dick was getting anxious about the others before the hail reached them. All stared at the bank promptly, and discovered the figures of Scoutmaster James, the Colonel, and Jack the Canadian, though of Billy and Red Fox there was not so much as a sign. But in went the paddles swiftly, the canoes shot a little nearer to the bank, while a succession of plunges told that their friends had taken to the water.

"Goodness, it was hot in here!" gasped the Colonel, when he had been drawn aboard the canoe. "What has happened? Where are Billy and Red Fox?"

"Not worry about them," said Eagle. "Indian not make a mistake. Fire come up between them and the river. They turned back to the open."

"And that rascal? You've killed him? I heard rifle shots. Dear me, what a relief it is to find you are alive! But tell me all about it."

Tom told him rapidly about their adventures, and how Raines had set fire to the forest.

"The desperate villain!" exclaimed the Colonel. "It proves what an unprincipled ruffian he is. To further his own escape he fires a forest in which, for all we know, other people may be living. I don't complain

for ourselves. When we undertook this chase we willingly faced all risks. He will escape?"

He turned to Eagle and gazed at him expectantly. But, as on many another occasion, the Indian did not venture to answer. His eyes were following the drifting smoke, and the huge tongues of flame which belched from the forest. Then they travelled up the bank of the river, sought the sky, and finally fixed themselves on the Colonel.

"Not know," he said abruptly. "A little while ago I said he would escape to the open certainly, where we should capture him to-morrow. Now perhaps he will not escape. The wind changes often, the heat draws the air in different directions. Our friends report that the fire sets up the river. Mayhap it has ringed in a space. See there! The smoke is dense just above us, and then there is a clear space. Tongues of flame can be seen higher up, leaping across the river."

It did begin to look as if a small track of forest had been spared till now, the fire having swept higher up the river. And that tract occupied the exact position in which Raines and his two comrades had been located. It was there that all the fighting had taken place, there that Tom had come to handgrips with the Indian. Somewhere in the unfired area was the tree in which Raines had taken shelter. Perhaps the flames had encroached upon it, for it was at that point that the conflagration had been started. But even so it had not come closer to the river. It had swept backwards, and then to either side, till, caught by the prevailing wind, it swept eastwards, hugging the stream and cutting off escape in that direction.

Raines was, indeed, in no enviable position. The fury of this fire of his own making appalled him, and at first, when eddying gusts swept the flames hither

and thither, he had crouched in the hollow trunk to take shelter from them. The heat was great, almost unbearable, while his hair and brows were already singed. As to the tree itself, the dried bark was blistering in all directions, while in one place it smouldered, filling the interior with a pungent smoke.

"Getting cooler," chuckled the villain after a while. "This is a fine doing. I never imagined that the flames would leave me alone; but they have. The forest's burning above and below, and straight in front. Those fools can't get near me. Guess they're roasted, or running for it."

The thought gave him huge enjoyment. He peeped from the tree to inspect his surroundings, and then crouched down again.

"Couldn't move yet," he told himself. "Place far too hot. But if it's too hot for me, what'll it be for them? A smoke wouldn't be bad just now. It'd be kind of calming."

He felt more at ease than he had done for some little while, though, to tell the truth, his arm caused him considerable suffering. But what was pain like that to a man whose life is in danger, who sees the gallows erected before him? Raines told himself that it was a mere fleabite if only he were secure. A matter to be easily set in order once he had shaken off his pursuers. He filled his pipe complacently, lit the weed, and smoked thoughtfully, wondering what he would do once he was free of the forest. And thus he sat for ten whole minutes."

"Getting hot again; lots of smoke," he suddenly observed. "Guess I'd better be seeing what's happening."

He rose languidly, supported his wounded arm with his other hand, and looked out of the opening. The hollow trunk was still smouldering, while dense smoke

still poured from the ashes of the bracken where he had first ignited it. But that was not the thing which caught his attention. He glanced to right and left, up and down the river, and suddenly started. Across his rascally features there came again that harassed, desperate appearance. His eyes protruded in a manner which was positively ugly, while his lips twitched so that the pipe dropped from between them. For what Raines saw was terrifying. That same erratic wind which had seemed to work in his favour at the beginning had swerved again, and was now doubling back upon its former track. It was sweeping flames, sparks, and smoke before it, and, worse than all, it was rapidly bearing the fire down upon that very spot where he had taken refuge. He darted from the tree and looked about him like a hunted animal. Below him there was a dense wall of flame. All round him was a roaring furnace. Yes, all round him, for that insidious wind had stolen a march upon the villain. It had swept fire into the belt of trees hitherto immune from it, and it had caused the flames to steal down in a narrow belt close to the river. The man's escape was all but cut off. While he looked and hesitated the gates of safety were closing. And on the other side of those gates lay the river, safety from the fire, but capture, imprisonment, trial before a jury, and the inevitable hanging.

Let the reader imagine the man's awful predicament. He had not hesitated, a while before, to declare that he would willingly risk burning if only he could beat his opponents. But now, when the thing actually stared him in the face, when greedy flames stretched out their devouring arms to seize him, the man quailed. His knees shook beneath him; he almost fainted. But that desire for life which fills us all caused him still to struggle. He could not face the anguish of burn-

ing. Anything rather than a fate so horrible. He gave one despairing shriek, and then raced towards the river. He turned his steps to that narrow patch of forest where the flames had not yet reached, and came racing towards it, his screams reaching the ears of Tom and his friends. They were so piercing that they even rose, for a moment or two, above the roar of the flames, the crackle of splitting wood, and the crash of falling trees. Then of a sudden the man reached that narrow belt which cruel fortune had cast before him. The wind increased in violence a trifle, and what was a gate of safety before became now but a fiery passage. However, safety lay by that road alone, and the poor terrified creature took it desperately. He plunged amid the sparks and tongues of fire. At last he emerged, his clothes alight, his hair singed entirely, while his white skin was now as black as that of a sweep's. Still the flames pursued him. Raines lost all knowledge of his surroundings. He became, in fact, an actual madman. Down he dashed to the river, flames pouring from his clothes. Then, with one last, despairing shriek, he plunged into the water.

"Paddle! We'll pull him aboard and do what we can for him," cried the Colonel, and obedient to the order the canoe shot toward the spot where Raines had dived. He came to the surface. They saw his arms raised above his head; then he sank again, and though they watched, there was no further sign of him.

"Gone!" said the Scoutmaster solemnly, bending his head into his hands. "May the Lord have mercy on him; he was a wicked man!"

"Amen!" came from the Colonel. "He brought it all on himself. His blood be on his own head."

"Better paddle away," suggested Eagle. "Hot

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here. Canoes begin to blister. Besides, trees falling."

The place was not exactly safe, without a doubt, and since there was now nothing more to detain them, the party made the fastest time back to Winnipeg. There the Indian guides were dismissed with a present. Frank and Jack came to the station to see the Colonel and his comrades off, and parted with them after much shaking of hands, the scouts' salute, and a definite promise to come the following year to Slimington, there to join in the work of the Fox Patrol for a while.

"And now we make for Toronto," said the Colonel. "We will see our friends who cared for Tom when a little boy, and then get home to England."

A week later Tom and Dick, with the Colonel and Scoutmaster James, were seated in the office of Messrs. Purvis, Solicitors, of Toronto, and were awaiting the arrival of the senior partner of the firm. He came at last, and shook hands effusively with them.

"Congratulations, sir," he said, shaking the Colonel's hand for the second time. "Indeed I am delighted to meet my co-executor, and still more so to hear the story you have communicated. So Anderson is dead, and this ruffian, who helped him, also? Lucky dog, Tom! Lucky dog! Any other fellow would have been under the waters of the Thames, or floating dead out in the Atlantic. You're seventeen now? Isn't that it?"

Tom nodded; he rather liked this breezy solicitor.

"Then, before very long we shall have to set you free. You understand, of course, that your father left you his sole legatee, with the exception of his sister."

"Just so," interrupted the Colonel. "But, Mr. Purvis, how comes it that you have never been able to gather news of that lady?"

The solicitor's small eyes opened rather wide.

"Because, sir," he said quickly, "the lady died before her brother, and was, therefore, unable to give any information. Further, let me add, there were extraordinary difficulties in tracing her relations; for, naturally enough, her husband was entitled to the fortune which she would have inherited had she survived."

"Difficulties? Yes, I understand that," agreed the Colonel. "But of what nature?"

Mr. Purvis put the tips of his fingers together, leant back in his chair, and closed his eyes. "My dear sir," he began, "to you those difficulties may appear childish. The lady's name was Brown."

Dick looked up sharply. "My name," he said.

"Precisely; yours, and the man round the corner, the solicitor in the next street, the joiner over the way, the undertaker. There are thousands of Browns, let me inform you."

The Colonel laughed. "Quite so," he said. "It is not surprising to hear that you could not trace the lady."

"We advertised out here and at home. We had a million replies, but not one of the claimants could trace their relationship with Mr. Kidman."

"Stop!" cried Dick. "I beg your pardon, sir. You said Kidman?"

"Kidman. Yes. K-i-d-m-a-n. Kidman," replied Mr. Purvis, smiling.

"Then I claim that relationship." Dick stood to his feet, his face burning hot, his honest eyes lit up by excitement. And the declaration he had made turned out to be perfectly truthful, as one might have expected. In the course of a few days, indeed, it was proved to the satisfaction of everybody that Dick Brown's mother had been sister to Tom's father.

"Then I'm your own dear cousin," grinned Dick

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when the news reached them. "Your cousin and fellow scout."

"While my father was your uncle," cried our hero, somewhat dumbfounded. "That's awfully queer."

"My dear boy," laughed Dick, "I've often thought you were rather like me. Ain't you pleased, just? But, Colonel, what brought Mr. Kidman out here?"

"That is a question I cannot reply to. Probably to make money."

"He was successful," suggested Dick.

"Very; dollars simple fell into his lap. He set up stores."

"Stores!" cried Tom and Dick together.

"Yes: stores where sugar and suchlike things were sold."

"A grocer," shouted Dick, grinning excitedly.

"Heard it, Tom? You ain't ashamed of your father."

Tom blushed to the roots of his hair. He remembered his small-mindedness in connection with Jones of the Slimington troop, and for the moment felt abashed. But Dick cheered him. He gripped his brave friend by the hand.

"Don't matter what a chap's born," he cried, "so long as he turns out decent. Reckon you're that. My, ain't I glad I met you!"

Need the reader be informed that the two lads continue now the firmest of friends. They are back in Slimington, themselves scoutmasters now, and keener than ever. And since their trip to Canada their troop has been visited by Jack and Frank, and other scouts from Winnipeg. More are to follow. The scouts are sowing friendships everywhere. They are following the example set by their leader. Hats off to the Chief Scout!

